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The Life of Gay

by
**KEBLE
HOWARD**

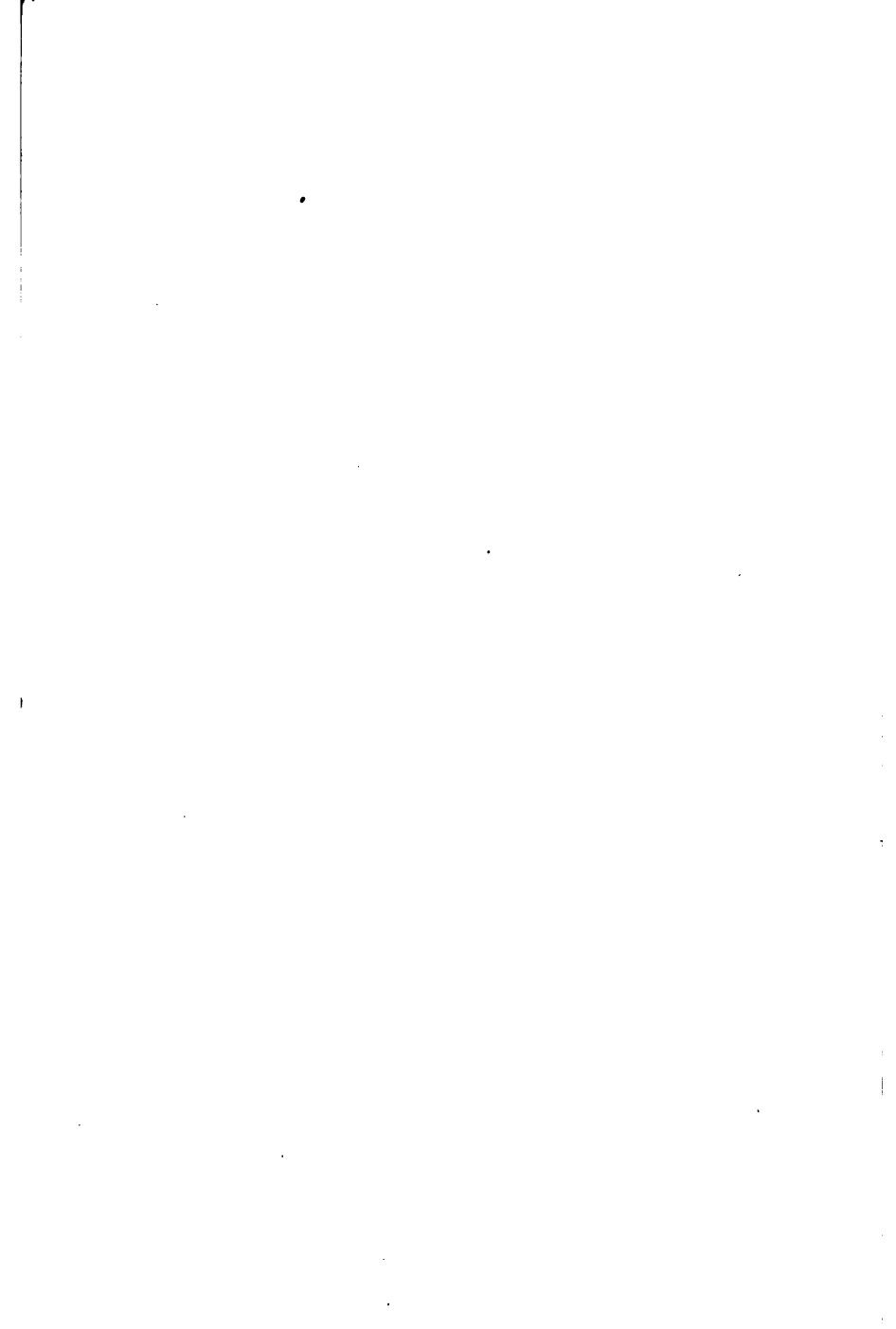
TO-NIGHT!
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NIPCHIN**
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APPEARANCE IN
AMERICA
OF THE
GREAT
ENGLISH
COMEDIENNE!
TO-NIGHT!

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W.W.

THE GAY LIFE

BY
KEBLE HOWARD (*Howard*)

Bell, John Kettle

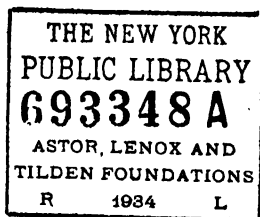
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TO
SIR ARTHUR PINERO
IN ADMIRATION AND GRATITUDE

31X685



PREFACE

A LARGE section of the public, which derives its opinion of theatrical life from novels written by sex-specialists on the one hand or professional purveyors of inexpensive pornography on the other, has come to believe that Stageland is an unspeakably awful place wherein wondrously beautiful but shockingly ill-paid girls are forever being hounded to their doom by fleshy, callous men, generally of the Hebrew race.

We all know these novels. I, for one, am more than a little tired of them. Stageland is far wider, far cleaner, far healthier than such writers would have us believe. There is the repertory theatre, for example, where brains are of greater importance than fine clothes or physical beauty; there are the Halls, where the cultivation of the domestic virtues would rather astonish easy-going Mayfair; and there is the West End, where the Victorian yearning after simple grandeur for its own sake dies hard.

Finally, there is the good, honest, fighting, struggling, exulting, despairing, philosophical rough-and-tumble of the provinces, where many a fine actor and actress lives and works, utterly

unknown to the London public. But they do live!
And they do love! And they do laugh!

Something of these neglected aspects of the
profession of my heart I have tried to mirror in
the following humble story.

KEBLE HOWARD.

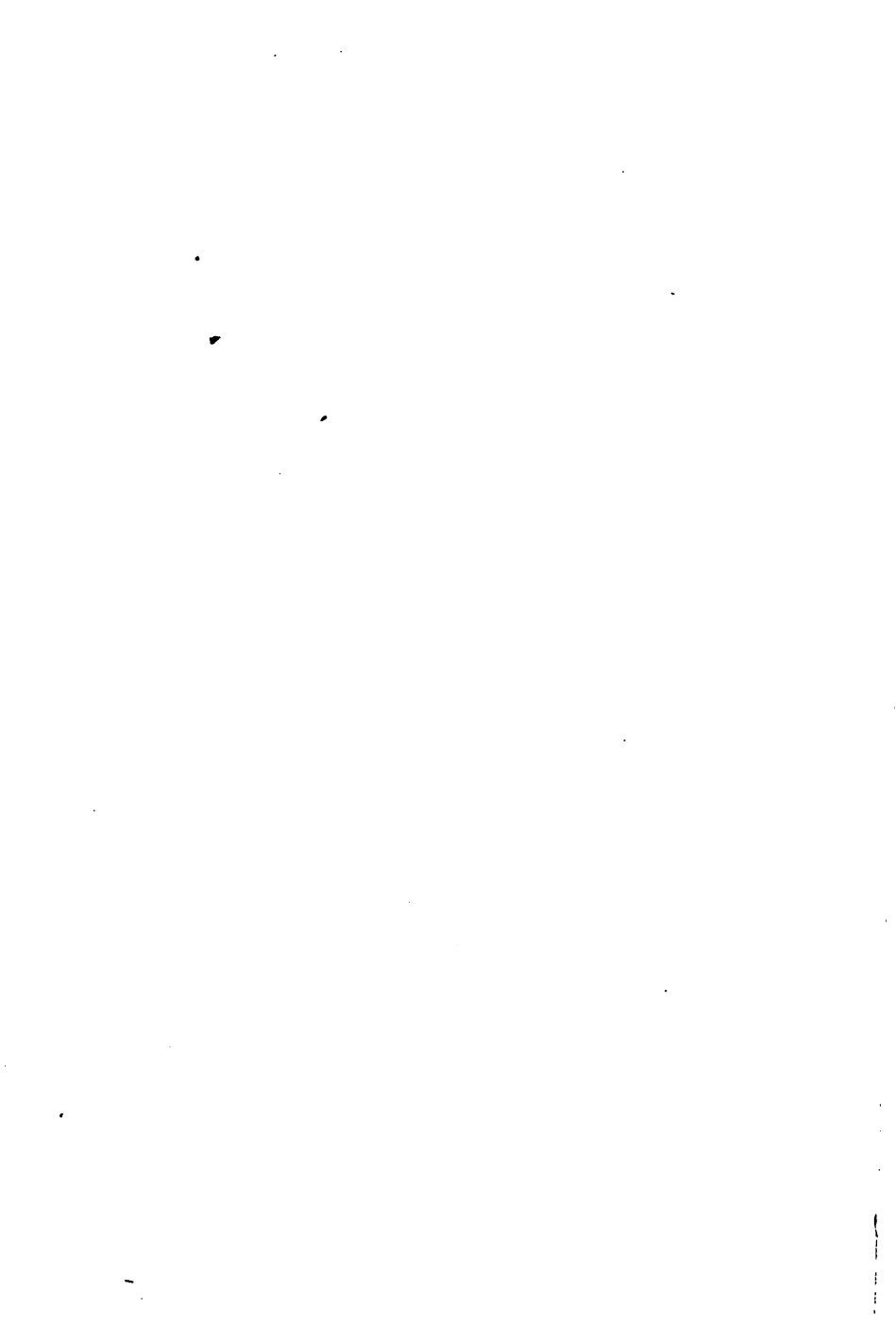
"As You Like It,"

Merstham, Surrey.

June 21, '16.

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T H E G A Y L I F E



THE GAY LIFE

CHAPTER I

BUTTING IN

I

THE panel-doctor drummed his fingers on the counter of Mr. Nipchin's dingy little shop. Mr. Nipchin was out on business. Mrs. Nipchin stood on the other side of the counter, backed by green and yellow cardboard boxes of cheap cigarettes, and listened to the doctor. Jilly peeped round the door that led from the shop to the dark little living-room. The doctor did not notice Jilly. Although turned sixteen, she was not much bigger than Orris, who was only twelve.

"He doesn't get any better," said the doctor, who could not afford to beat about the bush with panel-patients, "and I don't think he will unless you can get him out of this. The boy wants air—sea air, for choice. Can you give him a few weeks at the sea?"

Mrs. Nipchin, who was a feeble person at the best of times, shook her head. Jilly felt that she would like to take her mother by the shoulders and shake the rest of her. Jilly often felt like that.

"It ain't possible," said Mrs. Nipchin, gazing vacantly through the open doorway into the dingy street. "Yer see, the Waterloo Theaytre, where me 'usband works of a night, 'as bin shut this last two munfs, an' as fer the shop, I always tells 'im as we loses a bit on it 'stead o' makin' a bit, so w'y keep it open, I says, fer the benefit o' others? Becos, mind yer, they don't thank yer! Much more likely ter grumble when there's a——"

"Well," cut in the doctor, "I must be off. But bear in mind what I say: get the boy to the sea by hook or by crook; I'm afraid it's his only chance."

He hurried out, and Mrs. Nipchin, by way of mending matters, sat down behind the counter to cry. This was too much for Jilly. She bounced at her mother, and pulled the apron from her face without ceremony. It was a clean apron. Most feeble people are dirty, but Mrs. Nipchin could not follow a consistent line, even in that.

"Come, mother," said Jilly, "there's no sort of sense in crying! It's salt air as Orris wants—not salt tears! And he's going to have it, what's more, or my name ain't Jilly Nipchin!"

Mrs. Nipchin fumbled feebly for the apron, but

not finding it—for Jilly held on firmly—she let eight large tears roll down her nose, four on each side, and then went to put the potatoes on for dinner. Jilly followed her.

"Look here, mother," she continued, "am I sixteen or am I not?"

"I think you are," replied Mrs. Nipchin.

"You know very well I am. If not, there's the Family Bible to bear me out. And now another thing—do girls of sixteen turn out and earn their own livings or do they not?"

"I didn't," said Mrs. Nipchin, stooping to spear a potato which she had dropped, and dropping five more in the process.

"Perhaps it would have been better," observed Jilly, "if you had. You might have known how many things there are in the world worth crying about, and just what amount of good crying does."

"Go on at me," said Mrs. Nipchin. "Don't spare me. Go on at me, by all means. It's all I'm fit for. I know that well enough."

Having at last collected all the potatoes from various corners of the parlour, and coaxed them into the saucepan, and set them on the fire, she collapsed into the old arm-chair and again took up her apron.

"Now, mother," Jilly warned her, "if you start that waterspout business all over again, as sure as eggs is eggs I won't tell you my plan!"

"Plan?" repeated Mrs. Nipchin, eyeing her daughter in amazement, as though the word, being Hebrew or Sanskrit, had then been introduced for the first time to her notice. "Plan?"

"Yes," said Jilly. "Plan. There are such things, you know, and I've got one. I've had it a long time. It's bin simmering at the back of me head. Put that apron down, mother, and I'll tell you. Keep it up, and not a word shall you hear. So now!"

Mrs. Nipchin let fall the apron, folded her hands, and waited. Jilly had always been a strange child. From very early days, Mrs. Nipchin had marvelled that this creature could be her own offspring. For Jilly said things that she could never have heard at home, and did things that she had never been taught to do at home. She could dance to a street-organ, for example, in the lightest and cleverest way; Mrs. Nipchin had never taught her that. She could make her voice sound as though it came from next door or up the chimney or out in the street; Mrs. Nipchin had never taught her that. When her father secured a couple of orders for the pit at the Waterloo Theatre, Jilly could come home and "take off" all the actors and actresses "to the life"; Mrs. Nipchin had never taught her that. With these antics, moreover, she could make her father laugh as though his pockets were lined with gold; Mrs. Nipchin, most certainly, had never taught her

that. Indeed, when she came to think of it, she had never taught her anything, not even to cry.

"I'm going on the stage," said Jilly.

"On the stage?" repeated Mrs. Nipchin, feeling for the apron again.

"That's what I said, and if you dare to touch that apron, mother, I won't say good-bye to you before I go, neither."

"What ever will yer father say?" asked the poor lady, baulked of her favourite refuge.

"I can't help what father says. He's out of work himself, for the time being, and you say the shop don't pay, and the doctor says as Orris must go to the seaside. Well, I'm going to get the money to send him there, and if father kicks up a row you must nobble 'im, mother."

"*Nobble 'im?*" gasped Mrs. Nipchin.

"That's what I said."

"*Me? Nobble 'im? Nobble yer father?*"

"Yes, mother. You don't want Orris to die, do yer?"

Up came the apron, and this time Mrs. Nipchin would not be denied. Jilly went round to the back of the old arm-chair, and put her arms round her mother's neck.

"Chuck it, old dear," she murmured, in her silky, caressing little way. "We all loves Orris, don't we? And the money must be got, mustn't it? And I'm the one to get it. Don't you be afraid, mother. I know folks. I'm not a kid."

Nor yet a fool. I know my way about, thanks muchly. Jest you trust yer Jill. She'll pull the chestnuts out o' the fire. Fat lot father knows about gels, or anything else for that matter, 'cept shovin' flats about and muddlin' the shop accounts. I know father. 'E's a good sort, bless 'im, but 'e's N. G. For getting on, I mean.

— Jest a couple o' kids tergether—that's what you and father are. Guess I'm what they call a throwback. You'll see. I've watched them rotten actresses at the 'Loo, and I can knock their silly heads off! Jest you wait a bit. Orris shall go to the sea, and you shall have a new dress, and father can muddle along in the old way, bless 'im, and lose a bit over the shop till 'e's ninety!"

Jilly concluded this remarkable harangue by doing the "splits." She then went upstairs making noises like a taxi-cab, kissed Orris, told him he was going to the seaside—which at once brought colour to his cheeks and a new light to his eyes—made a grimace at a passing stoker who had dared to blow her a kiss, gave the yellow-hammer some fresh bath-water and a few grains of seed, clapped on her mother's best hat, and was out in York Lane in less than five minutes, all told.

"If I disappoint the kid," she muttered, "God may forgive me but I'll never forgive meself! So buck into it, Jilly Nipchin, and yer'll live ter play 'Feelia an' Lady Macbeth at the 'Ippodrome yet!

II

Ilott's Theatrical Agency, for which Jilly was bound, is not the smartest of its kind. It is situated in a narrow street on the south side of the Strand, and the outer room, where the applicants assemble, is mercifully dark. An old and shiny coat will pass muster at Ilott's that would never do for the light and airy waiting-room where the London artistes flaunt their finery. An old skirt is not so old, after all, at Ilott's; boots that have tramped many a mile in search of work forget that burst at the seam or that hole in the sole; old hats that have been trimmed and retrimmed, brushed and rebrushed, as the case may be, take on quite a jaunty and juvenile air in the waiting-room at Ilott's.

It is the same with the wearers. Once inside Mr. Ilott's friendly door, and lines disappear from tired faces like magic; complexions are clear again, eyes are bright once more, hollows in the cheek are not so visible. It is always artificial light in the waiting-room at Ilott's, and the mummer loves the light in which he lives.

Jilly had never been in that waiting-room before, but she had often passed the door, and had always felt that fame and fortune lay beyond the threshold. This morning, when she took the plunge, her heart was beating very fast indeed,

but her sharp little face, with the shrewd, merry grey eyes set so well in the head, and the determined little mouth so firmly compressed, looked almost as calm as she hoped and imagined.

What a curious collection of types met her eye! Here were old men in top-hats and mangy fur collars, rubbing elbows with pale youths in shabby tight suits and the latest style of collar. Here were women of all ages, from fat old ladies, who had played Juliet to the Romeo of every dead and gone celebrity you could name, to slim girls with wistful faces who had never played anything worth speaking about, and felt convinced that they never would.

What a collection! What hunger, and hope, and disappointment, and simulated self-confidence were here! Snatches of conversation fell on her ears:

"I told him straight, my boy! Ten pounds or nothing! Take it or leave it!"

"Anything more disgraceful I never saw as long as I've been in the profession! I wouldn't have put a pig in such dressing-rooms! As for my throat before the week was out——!"

"You don't want to go up West for it. I'll give you an *address*, dear, where you can get just the same thing for——"

"As I told Irving when I was with him at the Lyceum, 'Harry,' I said, 'as sure as ever you cast that man for 'Oratio yer askin' fer a bloomer,'

I said. And Irving says to me, 'Tom, old boy——' ”

Most of them were standing up, tired as they looked. This puzzled Jilly, who, for all her swank, was glad to nestle down on a bench by the side of a very tall, very pale girl with dark hair and a voice almost as deep as a man's.

"Tired, dear?" asked the tall girl, in the gloomiest, deepest tones that Jilly had ever heard.

"Not so much as all that comes to," said Jilly, "but, seeing a spare pew, I thought I might as well occupy it. Hope you don't object?"

"I?" said the tall girl, in the same cavernous, sepulchral manner. "Not in the least. But you don't stand much chance of getting a shop if you sit down. Or, for that matter," she added, touching an even deeper note yet, so that Jilly wondered if she were a "girl-baritone," or something splendid of that sort, "if you stand up."

Jilly did not wish to appear stupid. At the same time, she knew very well that the best way to get information quickly is to ask questions. Having duly pondered over the tall girl's enigmatic remark, therefore, and discovered no solution, she observed:

"Sorry and all that, old thing, but I don't get you."

"You soon will," reverberated the tall girl. "When Ilott comes in. If he can't see you, you

might as well have stayed at home—if you have a home.”

“Oh! Now I’m on! Then, if I may put the question, why don’t you stand up like all the rest?”

“Because Ilott knows I’m here. He sent for me.” To hear her, you would have thought that Ilott was the public hangman.

“Come,” said Jilly, in her cheery little way, “that means he’s got a shop for you, don’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” The tall girl sighed deeply. “More drama! More Wigans! Have you ever played at Wigan, dear?”

“I’ve never played anywhere,” confessed Jilly, lowering her voice.

“Then don’t,” boomed the tall girl.

“But I must! I need the money! It’s not fer meself! It’s for my kiddy brother, who’s ill, and the doc. says he wants sea air or he’ll never get well! I say, when you see Ilott, put in a word for me, will yer? I’m a nippy little thing, and I don’t care what I do!”

“What’s your line?” asked the tall girl, very gloomily indeed.

“Anything! Dance, sing, hang by me teeth from the flies, if yer like!”

“Could you play a boy, d’you think?”

“Rather! I should just say I could!” Jilly placed two fingers in her mouth and blew a piercing blast. “How’s that?”

Like a field of corn suddenly smitten by a gale of wind, everybody in the room turned in their direction. But the tall girl regarded them with such mournful eyes, and Jilly looked so surprised and innocent, that they thought some cheeky street-urchin must have shoved his head in at the door and so inquired no further into the matter.

"Excellent," said the tall girl, without enthusiasm. "I'll mention you to Ilott. What's your name? Have you a card?"

"Card?" returned Jilly. "Ho, yus! Here—ees—may—card." She went through the motions of a very grand lady opening a card-case with gloved fingers. "Leedy—Jilly—Nipchin. Is—Lord—Hilott—at home?"

The tall girl, without relaxing a muscle of her face, wrote the name on an envelope.

"Very well. I'll do what I can. But you won't like it, I can promise you that. Cold and dirty dressing-rooms, dear; stuffy and dirty trains; stuffy and dirty lodgings. You won't like it."

"But what about when you get to town?" Jilly reminded her.

"You never do," chanted the tall girl in her boots. "You go on hoping, perhaps, but you never do."

"I shall," said Jilly confidently.

The tall girl slowly shook her head.

"No, dear. You never will."

She was still shaking her head very mournfully

when a door at the far end of the room suddenly opened. The shabby, eager crowd surged forward, and all the conversation stopped as though they had been stricken dumb.

"Miss Dinwiddy?" said a sharp, business-like voice. "Is Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy here?"

"Here," replied the tall girl, rising majestically and moving forward.

The crowd opened, and the tall girl passed between the two rows of envious, hungry faces. Then the lane closed up again, and the conversation went on as before.

"What's doing?" asked somebody.

"'Stricken 'Ome,'" replied somebody else. "Braby and Mallett er sendin' it out agen—Threes and Fit-Ups."

"Jer mean to say they're going to give Nell Dinwiddy Lady Di?" scoffed a big, bony woman with red hair that was grey at the roots.

"Looks like it. There's nothing else in it for 'er."

"Well I *am* blest! *And me out!* That's torn it! I'm off!"

But she stayed, for all that, and watched the door of the agent's private office with the eye of a hawk.

III

Braby and Mallett must have made up their minds very quickly, for in less than two minutes

Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy reappeared, her countenance blacker than ever.

"Shopped?" asked a little man with a nose that turned to heaven.

"Yes," groaned Miss Dinwiddy.

"Good for you, Nell," said the little man. "'Appen to know if they've cast 'Ostler Jim'? I played it in Australia two year ago."

"I think not. I told them you were here."

"Bless yer, Nell! I'll do as much for you some day!" He caught her hand as she passed, and gave it a hearty squeeze.

Miss Dinwiddy, her face in statuesque repose, pushed through the crowd and resumed her seat by Jilly.

"So glad!" said Jilly.

"Thank you, dear. But I knew it was my fate. I mentioned you. Ilott will call for you at any moment."

"My golly good goodness!" exclaimed Jilly, and instantly straightened her mother's best hat.

"If it gets as far as terms," advised Miss Dinwiddy, "ask thirty-five. You won't get it, but ask it. Being a boy, I expect they'll find the clothes. I have to find my own, of course. I always do. Good-bye and good luck."

"Thanks ever so much!" said Jilly, with just a suspicion of moisture in her bright little eyes.

Miss Dinwiddy smiled gloomily, patted her shoulder, and was gone.

Jilly waited an hour, two hours. It was now dinner-time, and the crowd thinned considerably, for the old hands knew that Ilott and his clients had slipped out to lunch by a private door. But Jilly was not an old hand. She was a very young one, and very eager, so she stuck to her seat, expecting every moment to hear her name called.

By three o'clock the room was full again. A mingled aroma of whisky, gin, beer, and cheap cigarettes filled the air—if one may so describe the atmosphere of Mr. Ilott's waiting-room. The talk was a little louder. Salaries received in the "palmy days" of the Drama grew larger. The parts played were more magnificent. Successes were more tempestuous. Big names were bandied to and fro with careless ease. "Management" came in sight! One gentleman, in a coat decorated with the skin of some mysterious animal, even spoke, with contempt, of theatrical knight-hoods. He did not add that he had met a prosperous and open-handed comedian on the North side of the Strand, and engaged him in earnest conversation at the mouth of Exeter Street.

At last the door of Mr. Ilott's room opened. Silence as before.

"Miss Nipchin?" inquired Mr. Ilott, in a somewhat mellower voice. "Miss Jilly Nipchin?"

"'Oo in 'ell's that?" muttered a tragedian.

Jilly sprang on to the seat of the bench.

"Here!" she replied, in the sepulchral tones of Miss Dinwiddy.

They all turned to stare at her, and when they saw how small she was, and what a merry little face she had for all the emptiness of her little interior, and being relieved, perhaps, because she was not likely to compete with anybody present, there was a general laugh.

"Will you come this way, please?" said Mr. Ilott, and he returned to his private office, leaving behind him the scent of a rather good cigar.

Mr. Braby, a large, dark gentleman, with a nose very like a rainbow in shape, and not wholly unlike a rainbow in colour, was sitting in a deep arm-chair with his back to the window. He did not move as Jilly entered, but merely scanned her from head to foot and back again. Jilly looked about for Mallett, but could not discover him. In this she was not alone. Nobody ever had discovered Mallett.

"Sit down, Miss Nipchin," said Mr. Ilott, briskly but not at all unkindly. "This is Mr. Braby."

"How do," said Jilly, jerking her head at Mr. Braby.

Mr. Braby did not utter a word or move a muscle.

"Mr. Braby," continued Ilott, "together with his partner, Mr. Mallett, is about to take

out a tour of 'The Stricken Home.' Do you know the play, Miss Nipchin?"

"Seen pictures of it on the walls," said Jilly.

"No doubt you have. It's a fine play and a sure draw. Well, now, there's a very good boy's part going, and Miss Dinwiddy, whom we engaged this morning, mentioned your name for it. Are you a good boy?"

Jilly was very frightened, especially of the silent and motionless Braby, but she decided to repeat her success of the morning. Placing two fingers in her mouth, she blew the loudest and shrillest whistle she could manage. Mr. Braby jumped a little, but even then he did not speak. As for Mr. Ilott, he put *his* fingers in his ears, and puckered up his face like one in pain.

"That's all very well as far as it goes," he observed, when the performance was over, "but it doesn't tell us much about your capabilities as an actress. Mr. Braby is very particular about giving his patrons the best acting to be seen out of the West End. Indeed, many people think that his companies are better than West End companies. What experience have you had in boy parts, Miss Nipchin?"

It was not a very large office, but there was just room. Jilly rose, turned a cartwheel, and sat down. Mr. Braby had not stirred a limb or a feature.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Mr. Ilott. "I wish I could do that, don't you, Braby?"

Mr. Braby did not reply. He did not even turn his head. He just stared at Jilly like a wooden idol.

"'Whistle and cartwheel,'" wrote Mr. Ilott on a slip of paper. "Both useful things, Miss Nipchin, in the right part. Now tell me some of the characters you have played."

"Haven't played none," Jilly blurted out.

"*What?*" cried Mr. Ilott, gazing at her in astonishment over his spectacles. "Did you say you had never played a part?"

"That's right," said Jilly.

"But Miss Dinwiddy gave us to understand——"

"It wasn't her fault," broke in Jilly quickly. "You mustn't blame it on her. She asked me if I could play a boy, and I said I could. And so I could! You just try me!"

Mr. Ilott glanced at Mr. Braby. Mr. Braby, still sphinx-like, gazed at Jilly. Mr. Ilott shook his head.

"I'm afraid you've been wasting our time, Miss Nipchin," he observed.

Poor Jilly's little heart went down into her shabby little boots. But then she thought of Orris, fading away, like the yellow-hammer, for want of air, and up it came again.

"Look here, gents! Everybody must make a

beginning! W'y, even Marie Lloyd had to make a beginning! You just try me! It's all inside me, and I'll soon get it out! I'd make a lovely boy, I would indeed! Do give me a chance, won't yer?"

Mr. Ilott rose.

"Mr. Braby would be very glad to give you a chance, I'm sure, but times are bad, and managers can't afford to take risks. This is an important part, and we must have an actress of experience for it. However, I'll enter your name on my books, Miss Nipchin. Come in every day, and I may find you something more suited for a novice. Good afternoon."

He moved to the door, but Jilly intercepted him.

"Just a minute!" she implored, catching him by the coat with two feverish little hands. "I'd come cheap, I would indeed! I don't want no thirty-five shillings. Give me enough to live on, and I'll live on half of it, and send the rest home for my little brother. He's ill, sir, been ill a long time, and the doctor says he won't never get better unless he gets to the seaside. That's what I wants the money for, as God hears me! I'll work meself to the bone, I will indeed! Just try me! I'll make the nippiest little kid you ever saw! Ask 'im to try me! Do, please, ask him to try me!"

The tears were running down her face, making a strange contrast with the jaunty hat on her head,

but she never let go of Mr. Ilott's coat. The agent, who was not at all a bad sort, looked at Mr. Braby once again. Mr. Braby moved not a twentieth part of an inch.

"I'm afraid it's no go," said Mr. Ilott. "I'm sorry to hear about your brother, and I hope he'll soon be better, but you must see that we can't afford to employ inexperienced people out of charity. Come, now! Be a good girl, and don't waste any more of our time. Come in every day, as I told you, and I'll do my best."

He laid his hand on the handle of the door, but Jilly pulled it off.

"All right," she agreed, swallowing her sobs with a huge effort. "I'll be good. Give me half a shake to polish up me dial. I don't want all those folks to see me like this."

She searched for a grubby handkerchief, found it, and attacked her nose with such vigour that it shone like the setting sun.

"I'll let you out by the other door," offered the agent.

"Thanks," said Jilly, now quite herself again. She looked at Braby. "So long, old top!"

And out she went.

IV

Orris, lying in his bed and staring into the windows of the Pullman cars bound for the sea with

their load of yawning, peevish passengers, suddenly heard Jilly's light feet on the stairs.

"Where you been?" he asked, his white face brightening when she burst into the room.

"Never mind where I been," returned Jilly breathlessly. "I've got a plan. Something good. Something to do with you going to the seaside. But you must swear never to tell father!"

Orris wet his forefinger and drew it across his throat.

"I'm going to borrrer yore clothes," explained Jilly. "You mustn't ask me why nor nothing about it." Very rapidly she gathered them all into a bundle. "Is this the lot?"

"You ain't got the braces," said Orris. "W'y not 'ave the Sunday togs?"

"I don't want the Sunday ones. These are just the ticket. So long. See you later. Not a word, mind, not to mother nor nobody." And she bustled out of the room and into her own little attic.

Mr. Ilott and Mr. Braby, having engaged the small comedian with the upturned nose for Ostler Jim, and filled up all the other parts in "The Stricken Home," with the exception of the boy, felt that they had done a good day's work and deserved a good dinner. Mr. Ilott suggested oysters at Gow's, with a porterhouse steak to follow, and Mr. Braby, coming to life at last, nodded assent. More than that, he actually lifted him-

self out of the arm-chair, stretched himself—as though to convince Mr. Ilott that he could do anything of that sort if he liked—put on his hat, and followed the agent down the private passage into the street.

“Piper, sir! Litest! Speshul! Piper, sir!”

A rather ragged urchin, dirty and barefooted, barred the way, thrusting a paper right under Mr. Ilott’s nose.

Mr. Ilott found a halfpenny, bought the paper, and passed on. But the urchin was not done with them yet.

“Taxi, sir? ’Ave a taxi, capting?”

“No, thanks,” said Mr. Ilott. “Get out of the way, boy.”

“All right, capting! Good luck, Colonel! Good luck to ver ‘Stricken ‘Ome,’ capting!”

The two men stopped, and stared at the boy. He flung his papers to the pavement, turned a cartwheel, and picked them up again, grinning.

“Come here, boy,” said the agent. “What do you know about ‘The Stricken Home,’ eh?”

“Bless yer, sir, I knows pretty nigh heverythink, I does! I knows that pl’y back’ards! Pl’yed ver kid in it, I ’ave, scores o’ times!”

Mr. Ilott looked at Mr. Braby; Mr. Braby looked at the boy. The manager had suddenly turned to stone again.

“Played the kid in it?” repeated Mr. Ilott. “Where?”

"At ver old Waterloo Theaytre, dahn ver road there!"

"Is that the truth?"

The urchin wet his finger, and drew it across his throat.

Again Mr. Ilott looked at Mr. Braby. In the theatrical business, lucky finds are sometimes made in this unexpected way. Mr. Braby turned and walked back up the passage.

"Come this way, boy," said Mr. Ilott, "and I may be able to find you a better job than selling papers."

"Right yew are, capting!"

The little procession went along the passage and into the private office. Mr. Ilott switched on the light. Mr. Braby sank into the arm-chair. As for the urchin, he lingered in the doorway cautiously.

"Don't be afraid, boy," observed the agent. "Come in and shut the door."

The urchin obeyed, but he still remained as near to the door and as far from Mr. Ilott as possible.

"Now," said the agent, seating himself at his desk, and taking up a pen, "what's your name, boy?"

"Wot's thet ter do wiv yew?" demanded the lad truculently.

Mr. Ilott smiled. "You don't understand. This gentleman is taking out a tour of 'The

Stricken Home,' the play you mentioned outside. By the way, what made you mention it?"

"I 'eard some of 'em talkin' abaht it as they come aht."

"Oh, I see. Well, we want a boy for the part you say you played at the Waterloo Theatre. Would you like to play it again on four?"

"Not 'arf I wouldn't!"

"Well, then, I must have your name, and make some inquiries about you. The stage-manager at the Waterloo Theatre is quite an old friend of mine. Let me see, what's his name again?"

"Mister Doolan."

"That's quite correct. I'll see Mr. Doolan to-night, and if he says you gave a good performance I have no doubt Mr. Braby will offer you the part for tour. You can come and see me at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Now, the name, please?"

"Nipchin."

"What's that?" Mr. Ilott looked up sharply. Mr. Braby actually blinked.

"Nipchin," repeated the urchin.

"That's very remarkable," observed Mr. Ilott, glancing at Mr. Braby. "It's not a common name. Have you a sister?"

"Nah."

"Or any female relative of that name?"

"On'y a mother."

"That's very strange! Quite a coincidence!"

Nipchin, eh? Well, give me your other name."

"Jilly."

Mr. Braby blinked again, several times. As for Mr. Ilott, he rose from his chair, went across to the boy, whose eyes shone with delight, and pulled off his ragged cap. A crop of auburn hair tumbled down about the collarless coat.

"You little wretch!" cried the agent. "How dare you come here and call yourself a boy?"

"I didn't," said Jilly stoutly. "I never said I was a boy. You called me a boy, which shows you thought I was one, which shows I can act one. So wot about it now?"

Mr. Ilott looked at Mr. Braby. Mr. Braby, very slowly and carefully, lowered his left eyelid and raised it again.

"Well, Miss Nipchin," admitted the agent, "you've stolen a march on us. I congratulate you. Mr. Braby will be glad to offer you the part for tour at a salary of twenty-five shillings a week."

"Nothing doing," said Jilly.

"Eh?"

"Nothing doing. I told you this afternoon I'd come for anything you liked to offer, and you turned me down. Yes, you did! I begged you to take me on, and you turned me down. Now you can see I'm the goods and you want me for half nothing. You don't do it on me that way."

Mr. Ilott looked at Mr. Braby. Mr. Braby coughed—very slightly.

"Perhaps you'll tell me, Miss Nipchin, what you expect? Please bear in mind that you have no experience, and——"

"Yes, and I also bear in mind that I've got a stomach, which 'as to be filled, and a back, which 'as to be covered. Thirty-five bob a week is my terms. Take it or leave it."

Mr. Ilott did not even glance at Mr. Braby this time. He closed his book, put it away in the drawer, and locked the drawer.

"Good-night, Miss Nipchin. We won't trouble you any further in the matter."

"Thirty-two-and-six," corrected Jilly.

Mr. Ilott rose.

"Good-night, Miss Nipchin."

"Thirty bob," suggested Jilly.

Mr. Ilott put on his hat.

"Good-night, Miss Nipchin."

"Look here," said Jilly. "I'll tell you what I'll do, but don't let it go any further. You give me a quid in advance, and I'll take twenty-seven-and-six."

Mr. Ilott looked at Mr. Braby. Mr. Braby, so gently that nobody could have seen it unless they were expecting it, nodded.

Mr. Nipchin was storming from the shop to the parlour and back again to the shop twenty times a minute. Mrs. Nipchin was crying, quietly

and comfortably, by the fire. Orris was listening and waiting.

At last Jilly burst in, her arms full of parcels.

"You little varmint!" cried Mr. Nipchin, advancing on her. "To think that any daughter of mine——!"

Jilly faced him squarely.

"Father," she said, "hold on a minute."

She proceeded to lay on the table a pound of sausages, a crusty household loaf, a piece of cheese, half a pound of butter, and two bottles of stout. In front of these she placed a theatrical contract signed by Mr. Braby. In front of that, again, she placed half a sovereign, some silver, and a few coppers.

"The half thick-'un," she observed, "is ter pay fer Orris gettin' to the seaside. They'll take 'im for twelve-and-six a week at the Sannytorium, I'm told, and that'll be paid reg'lar by me. The grub is for any one as feels peckish, including me, not 'arf! Mother, put down that apron and fetch out the frying-pan while I tuck Orris up for the night. 'E won't 'arf 'ave nice dreams, eh, wot?" And she rattled upstairs.

"Well, I *am*——!" said Mr. Nipchin, slowly removing the screw-stopper from the nearest bottle.

CHAPTER II

COLD HAM AND CARTWHEELS

I

THE great clock on Euston Station stood at ten minutes to twelve. Mr. Braby walked slowly and heavily along the departure platform until he came to the coach labelled:

RESERVED
for Braby and Mallett's
"Stricken Home" Co.
Euston to Blackborough.

"Morning, Mr. Braby," said a smallish man who looked as if he had been up all night. His collar was dirty, and his chin unshaven, but he atoned for these deficiencies by wearing his hat at a jaunty angle and chewing a tooth-pick. This was Mr. Plam, the stage-manager. He had seven children, a scolding wife, no money, a bright eye, the smile of an angel, and a heart of gold. Mr. Plam loved the road.

"All aboard?" asked Mr. Braby, in a whisper.

"All but Nipchin," replied Mr. Plam.

"Where is she?"

"Not turned up yet, sir. Sure to be here in a minute. Don't you worry, Mr. Braby, I'll keep a look-out for her."

"If she does us in," observed Mr. Braby, as though every word weighed a ton and had to be lifted out of him with a crane, "we're up the pole."

Quite exhausted by this conversational effort, the manager clambered into the compartment reserved for him, sank into a corner seat with a thud that made the woodwork creak again, and relapsed into apathy.

Mr. Plam looked again at the great clock, and scratched the top of his head, very daintily, with the tip of his little finger. The train was due to start in six minutes. The company began to get excited. Mr. Jack Titmuss, the little comedian with the upturned nose, who was playing Ostler Jim, joined the stage-manager on the platform. Mr. Titmuss was very smart. He wore a Trilby hat, a blue suit—a little shiny at the knees and elbows—very pointed brown boots, a red waistcoat, and had the end of a cigarette, long since extinguished, sticking to his upper lip.

"Bit of all right if she's gone to King's Cross by mistake," commented Mr. Titmuss.

"She's too smart for that," returned Mr. Plam.

"Think so?"

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"I do. Got a headpiece on her, has little Nip-chin."

"Come to a pinch, I might manage to double the nipper with Ostler Jim."

"And both on in the same scene? You'd be clever, Jack."

"Struth! That's right. I'd forgot that!"

Four minutes to twelve. Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy, whose natural gloom was intensified by a bad influenza cold, regarded Mrs. Houseboy, the *grande dame*, and Miss Dulcie Link, the *ingénue*, with glazed eyes.

"We shan't be able to open to-morrow night," she announced in a cavernous voice. "Probably not at all."

"Oh, my goodness me!" retorted Mrs. Houseboy. "Don't hint at such a thing, my dear! Three weeks' rehearsal and then not open! It's disgraceful. Something must be done! Just keep your eye on my hold-all, and my bonnet, and my paper-bag, Dulcie, dear, and I'll inquire into the matter! Not open! Oh, my goodness!"

"Way not leave it to the men?" piped Miss Link. "That's the worst of these amachoor! They're always leet!"

But Mrs. Houseboy was already at the window, angrily demanding of an indifferent porter, who smelt of lamp-oil, if he realised that they might not be able to open at Blackborough the following night with "The Stricken Home."

Two minutes to twelve.

"We're done in for sure," said Ostler Jim.

"Not us!" retorted Mr. Plam. "I say, inspector, have you seen a little girl, about so high, with a funny little face?"

"Hat three sizes too large for her?" asked the inspector.

"Very likely. Is she on the train anywhere?"

"I dunno. But I saw a rum little cove answering to that description knocking about the station over an hour ago."

"What did I tell you?" cried Mr. Plam. "You go that way, Jack! I'll go this!"

They darted off, the inspector shouting after them that they had just one minute. The train was a corridor, cut into two in the middle by a luggage van. Mr. Plam, still on the platform, passed the luggage-van and raced towards the engine, glaring into every compartment as he went. Almost at the top of the train he found Jilly. She was seated very comfortably in a first-class compartment, deep in the thrilling serial of *The Blood Budget*.

The guard had actually blown his whistle. Jilly found herself dragged along the platform at lightning speed and thrust, as the train was moving, into the carriage on the right side of the luggage-van.

"My word!" said Mr. Plam, fanning himself

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with his hat. "That was a near shave! Got all yer traps?"

"Yes," replied Jilly, straightening her mother's best hat. "And now I'll thank you to explain matters, Mr. Plam! I'm not accustomed to this sort of thing, and so I tell you!"

"I should think you wasn't! What in thunder were you doing in a first-class carriage?"

"You seem to forget that I'm an actress!"

Mr. Plam stopped puffing to stare at her. Jilly returned the look with infinite dignity.

"And d'you mean to tell me," asked the stage-manager, "as you thought all actresses went first-class?"

"Certainly," returned Jilly promptly. "Our house looks over the railway. I've seen Sarah Bernhard go by more than once, Mister Clever, and she was gen'rally in a *saloon*, filled with lovely flowers!"

Mr. Plam glanced sharply at Jilly to see if she was pulling his leg. Deciding that she was quite serious in the matter, he smacked that limb as hard as he could, vowed that this walked off with the Huntley and Palmer, and led the way along the narrow passage to their own coach. Just before they reached it, however, he turned and put his hand on Jilly's shoulder.

"See here, kid," said Mr. Plam, "if I tell the company what you said, and where I found you,

they'll chaff the life out of you. Take my tip and cut it out. I won't let on."

"Then *don't* we go first?" asked Jilly, considerably dashed.

"No," explained Mr. Plam, "we blooming well do not. We go third, my dear, and if we didn't stand by each other in this profesh we should go in a milk-van. Never heard the story of the actors and the fish?"

"No," said Jilly.

"Well, you will! You'll hear it every Sunday as long as you're on the road. I've heard it every Sunday for twenty-five years—at least, every Sunday when I've had a shop, which isn't all the year round, worse luck!"

"Mr. Plam," said Jilly, "when I'm a star, and have a theatre of me own, will you be my stage-manager?"

"Jilly," said Mr. Plam just as solemnly, "I'll keep the date open if I have to refuse Sherbert of 'Is Majesty's Theatre himself!"

II

The long journey northwards was full of interest for Jilly. True, she had been to Southend with the Sunday School, and to Herne Bay with the Young Women's Christian Association, but this stately rumble through the Midlands knocked

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all the shine out of those trips. She was now on this side of the train, now on that, an enthusiasm greatly despised by Miss Dulcie Link, who wanted to tell Jilly about her boy, and her bangles, and her silk stockings.

"Are you engeeged?" she began, seizing a moment when the panting Jilly settled to take breath.

"Not me," replied Jilly. "Are you?"

"Oo yes! Hevn't you noticed may reeng?"

"Gee! Is that real?"

"Oo yes! May boy is quate well-off! His uncle's a lord."

"Lord!" echoed Jilly, with great reverence.

"Hevn't you ever met anybody nace?" pursued Miss Link condescendingly.

"Well, yes," admitted Jilly.

"Oo! Do tell me about heem!"

"Well, don't you go lettin' on about it, mind!"

"Oo, no! A never tell!"

"Becos, yer see, this bloke don't know as I thought such a lot of 'im. He's a doctor!" whispered Jilly, overcome by her own daring.

"Oo, A rather lake doctors. Is he a Harley Street doctor?"

"I dunno where he lives," said Jilly, "but he's our panel-doctor, see? And he's bin looking after my little brother Orris, what's gone to a lovely nursing-home at the seaside. Awful bad, he's bin, pore little kid, but Dr. Steele looked after 'im

frustrate and saved 'is life, I reckon! I shall look after 'im when I'm a star."

"Your brother?"

"That goes without sayin'. But after Dr. Steele as well. I shall kid I'm ill, see?—and then 'e'll be sent for speshul, and it'll be in all the pypers."

"Is he very nace-looking?"

"I should say so! Tall—make two o' me—an' very straight, an' a beautiful voice, an' grey eyes that go right through yer an' come out t'other side—— Hullo! 'Ere's Crewel!"

Another member of the company who contrived to detain Jilly for a few minutes—and those few minutes had a very important effect on her career—was Mr. Stanley Garland, the leading man. He was a cadaverous individual, with a beak-shaped nose and a rolling voice. He had been striving for this interview, in an unostentatious way, ever since the train left Euston, and at last secured it in the corridor.

"And so," began Mr. Garland, "to-morrow evening is to witness your *début* upon the stage, Miss Nipchin."

"What's that?" asked Jilly.

"Your *début*? Your commencement of a career that will, I trust, be crowned with great success."

"Thanks," said Jilly, and meant it.

"One never knows," went on the leading man.

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"You *might* be one of the few lucky ones, Miss Nipchin. You *might* be. There's no telling. I have been in the profession long enough to witness some very extraordinary successes—very extraordinary indeed. And comparative failures just as extraordinary. May I give you a word of advice?"

"I should say so," responded Jilly.

"At present, Miss Nipchin—forgive my frankness—you have one great fault, very usual in beginners. You have a tendency to over-act. Don't be offended! I'm only saying this for your good. Take, for example, your scene with me in the fourth act—your most important scene. That cartwheel—very bad! Oh, very bad indeed!"

"Mr. Plam told me to do it. He said it was fine!"

Mr. Stanley Garland lowered his voice:

"My dear Miss Nipchin, Plam is a very good man in his place, and a dear fellow. I'm tremendously fond of Plam. Dear old Plam, bless his heart! But his weakness is that he knows nothing of acting—nothing at all. Believe me, that cartwheel will do you any amount of harm with audiences. They won't like it. Cut it out!"

"But won't Mr. Plam be cross?"

"The chances are he won't know. He's too busy to watch the stage all the evening. He's got to work the rain-box, and ring the bells, and bark for dear old Pompey. If he does happen

to notice, tell him you've strained your back at rehearsal. But cut it out, my dear Miss Nipchin! I'm talking to you as a friend—you might almost say as a father! Cut it out!"

"Right O!" said Jilly. But she was sorry, because she loved turning a cartwheel, and Mr. Plam, and Jack Titmuss, and even the melancholy Miss Dinwiddy had praised it.

"Then there's another thing," added the leading man. "You whistle on your fingers. Cut it out."

"Mr. Plam told me to do that as well."

"Oh, come, come! If you're going to throw Mr. Plam in my face every time! Perhaps I'd better say no more, but when the governor gives you your notice on Saturday, don't say——"

"Oh, I didn't mean no harm," protested Jilly. "I won't mention Mr. Plam again! If I was to get my notice, Orris couldn't stay in the 'Ome!"

"Profit by my years of experience, and you won't get your notice. Play your part very quietly, Miss Nipchin. Keep as much as possible at the back of the stage, and let me pull you through. I'm a very great favourite at Blackborough, and if you interfere with my speeches the people won't like it. They'll be very angry, and they'll give you the bird. I know them. Keep it all down, cut out the whistle, and the cartwheel, and the smile, and I'll pull you through!"

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He held out his hand, and Jilly grasped it in sincere gratitude.

III

Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy heaved a deep, deep sigh. Then she groaned a little. After that, she heaved another terrific sigh.

Jilly, who was sharing a double combined-room with the melancholy one, sat up in bed. It was about eight o'clock on the morning after the journey from London.

"What's the matter, old dear?" she asked. "Feeling worse?"

"Yes, dear, much worse," replied Miss Dinwiddy, her deep voice sounding deeper yet from under the bed-clothes.

"Gee! Shan't you be able to get down to rehearsal?"

"No, dear, no rehearsal. You must explain to Plam for me."

"But what about to-night?"

"I must struggle through as best I can, dear."

"Will you know yer lines?"

"I don't know, dear. Probably not."

Seeing that Miss Dinwiddy had played the part of Lady Di in various companies some three hundred times, there was room for hope.

"Pore ole thing! I'll call out for some tea, shall I?"

"Please do, dear."

Jilly wrapped her ulster about her, and went to the head of the stairs.

"Ma!" she called, feeling very professional. No answer. "Ma! Are you there, Mrs. Roberts?"

"What's oop?" screamed a cross voice from the basement.

"My friend's feeling very poorly, and would like some tea!"

No answer.

"Can you make some, please?"

No answer.

"Can you make some tea, if you please?"

"When kettle boils and not afore!" shouted Mrs. Roberts.

Jilly thought of an excellent retort, but swallowed it, and returned to the room to dress. There was a word-rehearsal at eleven; she was ready long before that, however, and fussed over Miss Dinwiddy, who thanked her in sepulchral tones. At half-past ten, Jilly tucked her up snugly, told her to keep up her courage, and set off for the Theatre Royal.

The rehearsal passed off quite smoothly, and Jilly, before returning to her lodging, stopped at the stage-door to ask for letters; there was a postcard from Horace, with a picture of the Nursing Home on the back, and a boyish scrawl on the front. That was all.

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"Anything for Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy?" she asked. "If there is, I'll take it. I'm living with her."

At the mention of this name, a slim, clean-shaven young man, who had attracted Jilly's attention by the "swell cut" of his clothes, his good looks, and the pleasantness of his expression, left off lounging against the wall and raised his hat.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I'm an old friend of Miss Dinwiddy's. I'm showing at the Hippodrome here this week, and, seeing Miss Dinwiddy's name on the bills, I just called round to say how-do. Is she inside, would you mind telling me?"

Jilly at once scented romance. This filled her with joy. Miss Dinwiddy was so handsome, and so stately, and so much "the lady" that Jilly had long felt convinced she had a lover who was unkind to her. Which would account for the settled melancholy of her disposition.

"No," she replied, fixing the slim young man with a stare that was meant to be very reproofing. "She's not at all well."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I don't know," said Jilly, shaking her head. "You'd better come back with me and I'll ask her if she cares to see you."

"I shall be delighted," replied the slim young man, and away they went.

"What's your name?" asked Jilly, as they walked along.

"There it is," said the slim young man, stopping in front of a poster, and pointing with his stick. This is what Jilly read:

ED CHAUNCEY
THE GREATEST EQUILIBRIST IN THE
WORLD
IN STARTLING ACTS!!!

"My word! You must be a swell!"

The slim young man laughed.

"What's that long word mean?"

"I'll show you in a minute."

They soon came to another hoarding, and Mr. Ed Chauncey pointed, with a touch of natural pride, to a coloured poster.

"That's my act," he said modestly.

Jilly stared in wonderment. She saw a large wooden table; on that a smaller table; on that a smaller table; on that a very small table; on the very small table a chair; on the back of the chair another chair, legs in air; and at last, poised by one hand on one leg of the topmost chair, with his feet close to the summit of the hoarding, was Mr. Ed Chauncey!

"Is that you?" asked Jilly, no longer wondering that Miss Dinwiddy sighed and groaned so much.

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"That's me," admitted the slim young man.

"Then come quick!" commanded Jilly, seizing this paragon by the coat-sleeve and hurrying him off before some Blackborough young woman could snap him up.

The front door of Mrs. Roberts's residence stood open, and a handcart waited in the gutter. They passed into the passage, and were met by a strong smell of soot. The girls' room was on the ground floor at the back, and the door of that was also open.

"Wait here," said Jilly, and went into the room. She had no sooner entered than she nearly fainted with astonishment. The room was in chaos; furniture shoved aside, tables and chairs covered with dust-sheets, and both beds piled with small articles. To complete the picture, a grimy man was kneeling in the fireplace with his head up the chimney!

Jilly seized the sweep by the coat-tails. Withdrawing his head from the chimney, he gazed at her with eyes that looked ghastly in their setting of soot.

"Where's my friend?" demanded Jilly.

"In bed," replied the sweep, with a jerk of the head.

"What?" Jilly dashed across the room. "Nelly! What have they done to you? Are you there?"

"Yes, dear," said a muffled, resigned voice. "Here I am."

Jilly hurried into the passage. "Mr. Ed Something," she gasped, her eyes flashing and her little frame all taut with anger, "you looked a strong man in that picture! Come and chuck this blighter out! He's suffocating your Nelly!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Mr. Ed Chauncey, the Greatest Equilibrist in the World, swung into the room, caught up the sweep by the seat of his trousers and the collar of his coat, and ran him into the street. His broom followed and the door was shut and fastened. Mrs. Roberts, hearing the noise, came up the kitchen-stairs two at a time.

"What's t'meaning o' this?" she shouted.

"Meaning of it?" answered Ed, very alert but quite cool and happy. "I'll tell you the meaning of it! It means that these ladies have been insulted! It means that they're going to clear out of this pig-sty this very day, and the V. A. F.—which means Variety Artistes' Federation, in case you never heard of it—are going to have your name on their Black List if you say one word or charge one penny! I've heard something of this bullying of girls in the profession that don't happen to have a man around to look after them, and now I've seen it for myself. Miss Dinwiddy," he called through the doorway, "I ask your pardon for coming into your room without

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Knocking on the door. There are some fine rooms vacant at Number Eight, Longbridge Road, and I'm going right along there this moment to take 'em! I'll be back in ten minutes with a cab, and I mean to stay here and see you and your friend out!"

And away he went.

"I'm sure, miss——" began the frightened Mrs. Roberts.

But Jilly stopped her with an imperious hand that pointed to the basement stairs.

"Remember the V. A. F.!" she cried in a deep voice.

Mrs. Roberts withdrew.

IV

At six-thirty, Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy and Miss Jilly Nipchin, London artistes, went down to the Theatre Royal. Miss Dinwiddy announced that she was a complete wreck. She was muffled to the eyes and walked with a tottering step.

Jilly was quite concerned about her, and said as much to Mr. Plam, encountered on the stairs.

"Don't you worry your head about that," said Mr. Plam. "Wait till she gets her cue. She'll be on that stage like a two-year-old—head up, eyes bright, step firm, voice as clear as a bell! Bless yer heart, I know 'em!"

"I suppose," retorted the faithful Jilly, "you think she's shoving on side!"

"Not a bit of it! Feels a bit chippy, no doubt. But you wait till she gets her feet in the sawdust, and see if I'm not right! Look here, kid, I'll tell yer something. D'you know why women in the profession stay young all their lives? Look at Ellen Terry! Look at Sally Bernhard! Look at Ma Kendal! Well, I'll tell yer! It's the sawdust! There's magic in it. Keep their feet in the sawdust and they *can't* get old, much less die! How d'ye feel yerself? Bit nervous?"

"Not a bit," said Jilly.

"That's nothing to boast about. The young 'uns never are nervous. You wait. Look at my hand! That's not drink—that's nerves. And I've been on the boards all me life! Well, good luck, kid! Buck into it an' you'll make good all right."

Jilly went on up to the dressing-room which she shared with Mrs. Houseboy.

"Well, dear," asked that lady, "have you got nice rooms?"

"Real swell," replied Jilly. "Eight, Longbridge Road—Mrs. Pattison."

"Oh, yes, I know those rooms. I used to stay there with me husband when he was alive. I can't afford them now. But I suppose Dinwiddy gets a good salary, eh?"

"Dunno what she gets."

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"Well, all I can say is, those are the most expensive professional rooms in Blackborough. My word, how poor George did used to use langwidge when he got the bill!"

"Feeling nervous?" asked Jilly, slipping quickly into her ragged shirt and knickers, and smearing some dirty marks on her face.

"Nervous isn't the word, dear! I'm always the same on a Monday! You never know how they'll take you! Look at me hands!"

"Never mind," said Jilly. "You'll be all right when you get your feet in the sawdust."

She slipped down to the stage. It was quite deserted save for the local call-boy, who had stretched himself full length on the hired sofa that helped to furnish the first scene, and was deep in the *Gory Gazette*. He glanced indifferently at Jilly, and then went on with his reading.

A buzz of conversation came from the auditorium. Jilly found a little peep-hole in the curtain and expected to see a massed audience. To her surprise and disappointment, there were about twelve people in the pit and six in the gallery.

"What's it like?" asked the call-boy.

"Rotten," said Jilly.

"You won't do no good 'ere."

"Thanks," said Jilly. "Can you do a cart-wheel?" she added.

"No," replied the call-boy. "Nor you."

"Can't I?" retorted Jilly. And she turned one.

"Doing that in the show?" asked the call-boy, trying manfully to conceal his admiration.

"Not me," said Jilly. "I plays the part very quiet."

"More fool you," retorted the call-boy. "That won't knock 'em."

But Jilly was determined to follow the earnest advice of Mr. Stanley Garland, who had spoken to her as a friend, almost as a father.

And now they all began to assemble on the stage. Mr. Stanley Garland in riding-breeches that hung over at the knees a little, and a moustache that ran to a sharp point at both ends; Mrs. Houseboy, in black silk, with the complexion of a girl of eighteen; Miss Dulcie Link in a short frock, openwork stockings, very black eyelashes, and very golden hair; Miss Dinwiddy with a radiant expression and a firm step; Mr. Plam in his own trousers and a very aged dress-coat, thus representing the family butler; and Mr. Jack Titmuss in breeches and gaiters, shirt-sleeves rolled up, straw in mouth, and a red tip to his nose to inform the audience at once that he intended to be extremely amusing.

The orchestra finished the overture with a crash! Mr. Plam called, "Clear, please!" and ran to his corner! Mrs. Houseboy puckered her lips into a roguish smile! Up went the curtain!

As the play proceeded, Jilly began to have an uneasy feeling that all was not well. The audi-

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ence were not rising to it. As each person came off, she heard such expressions as "Rotten lot in front!" "Dead as mutton!" "Never played to such a house!" Jack Titmuss was the sole favourite, and even he, despite the straw and the red nose, had one or two unfriendly remarks addressed to him from the gallery.

Mr. Stanley Garland, that huge favourite, was received and dismissed in silence. Somebody called Mrs. Houseboy a "puss," and somebody else mimicked the affectations of Miss Dulcie Link.

As for Jilly herself, they simply tolerated her—that was all. Her best lines—the lines that she had been assured were "safe as houses," seemed to hit the house like icicles. To make matters a little more cheerful, Mr. Braby came round at the end of the play and sacked the lot.

Miss Dinwiddy and Jilly walked back to their rooms in a very dejected mood.

"Is it raining?" asked Jilly, just as they emerged from the stage-door.

"Yes, dear," chanted Miss Dinwiddy. "It generally rains in Blackborough."

They went on. Presently Jilly said:

"How did you think it went?"

"Rotten, dear. Nothing could have been worse. We've all got our notices."

"Does that mean we shall finish next week?"

"Yes, dear—if not this." Here Miss Dinwiddy touched the lowest note in her register.

Just as they sat down to supper, there came a smart tap on the door and Mr. Ed Chauncey walked in.

"Well, girls," he asked brightly, "how did the show go?"

Miss Dinwiddy repeated the mournful story.

"That's all right," returned Ed, fishing some parcels from the pocket of his big coat. "I'm going to invite myself to supper, if I may. Here's a pork-pie, and a cucumber, and some ham, and a bottle of whisky. Get hold of the vinegar, Miss Jilly, and see if you can make a salad. Miss Dinwiddy, what you want for that cold is a good stiff glass of grog. Here you are! Off with it. Never go by a Monday night in Blackborough. We went rotten at the Hip. I'm coming to the matinée on Wednesday, and you'll see what a hand you'll get! Feeling better, Miss Dinwiddy? I thought as much. Tried the piano yet? Well, we'll hit her up some after supper for sure! Here's to 'The Stricken Home' and a bumper house by Saturday!"

Miss Dinwiddy smiled—for the first time that day. As for Jilly, she ran round the table, gave Mr. Ed Chauncey a sounding kiss, which he returned just as heartily, and then they all fell upon the pork-pie and the ham and the salad like the good Bohemians they were, bless 'em!

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V

The next night the play went a little better, but not Jilly. Some of the company began to avoid her eye, Mr. Braby called her a little fool, and even Mr. Plam seemed disappointed. They saw nothing of Ed Chauncey on Tuesday night, and Jilly, thinking of her blighted hopes and the effect on Orris's fortunes, cried herself to sleep.

Ed Chauncey was in front at the *matinée* on the Wednesday and came round to the girls' rooms immediately afterwards.

"Come here," he said to Jilly. "Let me talk to the kid. What's the matter with you? You played the part as if you were going to a funeral!"

Poor Jilly burst into tears. Ed put his arm about her, and tried to console her.

"But why don't you buck into it?" he persisted. "You were full of fun here on Monday night! The part's all right! It's a fine chance! Why don't you put more snuff into it?"

"Mr. G-Garland—told me to—to play it that way!" sobbed Jilly.

"Damn Mr. Garland! He's not your boss! Can't you see that he wanted all the fat for himself? You take my tip! Go down to the theatre to-night, don't say a word to anybody, and put in all you know. You've got it in you—let it come out! Mr. Garland, forsooth! Play that crock off the stage, kid!"

Jilly decided to take this advice. After all, the leading man couldn't kill her, and, if he did, it was all for Orris. So she set her little teeth—and very nice teeth they were—and went down to the theatre for the evening show full of devilment.

A roar of laughter greeted her first entrance. Mr. Garland, amazed beyond measure, turned to find her walking towards him on her hands!

"Stop that!" he hissed, and then delivered his line—"Tell me, my boy, are you an orphan?"

The correct reply was, "Yes, sir." Jilly stuck her hands into the pockets of her breeches, planted her feet well apart, and said, in a very fair imitation of Mr. Garland's rolling voice:

"Yes, sir, *Hi ham!*"

Another roar of laughter. Mr. Braby, who was moodily discussing the decline of "legitimate" theatrical business in the provinces with the local manager, and trying to mend matters with a stiff whisky and soda, suddenly pricked up his ears. What on earth were they laughing at? There were never any big laughs in the first act—merely a few titters at Ostler Jim.

With the local manager at his heels, he made his way to the back of the circle. He was just in time to see Jilly turn a lovely cartwheel, which she rounded off with a few steps of defiance at Mr. Garland, a shrill whistle on her fingers, and a second cartwheel into the wings. It was not

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"legitimate"; it was not good Art; but, if it went on, it looked like saving a third-rate and dead-beat provincial company from ruin, and both Mr. Braby and the local manager knew it.

Jilly was in her dressing-room, revelling in the congratulations of the more generous-hearted of the company, when there came a loud thump on the door with a walking-stick.

"It's Garland!" cried Jilly. "He's furious! He's come to kill me!"

"Then it'll be over my body," declared Mr. Jack Titmuss, throwing himself into a pugilistic attitude.

A second mighty thump, and the door opened, revealing Mr. Braby himself. His hat was at the back of his head, and a small bonfire that had once been a cigar smouldered in his left hand.

"Nipchin," commanded Mr. Braby.

Jilly stepped forward. After all, she had already been sacked. He was bound to pay her a week's money. She didn't care! For all that, her knees trembled a little as she faced the manager.

"Keep it in," said Mr. Braby. Then he turned heavily about and went down the stairs. On the first landing he was intercepted by the leading man.

"May I speak to you a moment, Mr. Braby?"

The manager followed him into the dressing-room.

"I am sorry," began Mr. Garland, "to have to complain of any member of the company, but my scene in the first act was utterly queered by Miss Nipchin. I don't know whether you happened to be in front?"

Mr. Braby nodded.

"Oh, that's very fortunate. Then you saw, of course, the extraordinary way in which she was behaving?"

Mr. Braby nodded.

"And no doubt you were as annoyed as myself?"

Mr. Braby shook his head.

"You were not annoyed?"

Again Mr. Braby shook his head.

"Am I to understand, then, that Miss Nipchin is to be encouraged to continue these preposterous capers?"

Mr. Braby nodded. Garland drew himself to his full height, oblivious of the fact that he had removed his riding-breeches and was still in his pants.

"Mr. Braby, I have been on the stage, as you may be aware, for five-and-twenty years. I have played Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, the Silver King, and many other parts of equal calibre. I have been favourably compared in the press with Macready, Phelps, Irving, Wilson Barrett, and other leading lights of our stage. In short, sir, I am an

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artist, and I must insist that I shall not be subjected to——”

“Cut it out,” said Mr. Braby, unconsciously quoting Mr. Garland’s own advice to Jilly. And he turned his huge back on the leading man.

“Then am I to understand,” continued Mr. Garland, following the manager to the door and calling after him down the stairs, “that this tomfoolery is to continue?”

“Yes,” came back the voice of Mr. Braby from round the corner.

“By heaven!” cried the leading man, gnashing his teeth in front of his broken mirror to note the effect, “but he shall have my resignation before I sleep this night!”

Fired by the managerial blessing and the praises of her friends in the company, Jilly went at it with a will all the evening. Mr. Garland sulked more and more, but that did not matter. The audience had taken to the quaint figure in the tattered breeches and the old shirt, and Jilly worked off upon them all the tricks with which she had been wont to amuse Orris and the home-circle.

She really had a great gift for mimicry, and not a soul in the company was spared. Miss Dinwiddy’s majestic poses and deep tones, Ostler Jim’s funny strut and sharp voice, Mrs. Houseboy’s roguish smile and youthful capers, Miss Dulcie Link’s affectations and ultra-refined accent,

even Mr. Plam's stiff-legged butler—Jilly had them all ticked off to a nicety! Mr. Plam declared that, despite the small house, the piece had never gone so well since he had known it, and Mr. Jack Titmuss prophesied all sorts of glorious successes for Jilly in the future, including a double turn with himself at the Mile End Hippodrome.

In a provincial town, a play is made or marred by word of mouth. The Wednesday night audience carried laughing faces into the street, and into the public-houses, and into their homes. On Thursday night, when Jilly and Miss Dinwiddy came down to the theatre, there were already small queues at the doors of the pit and gallery. This is a never-failing barometer. By Friday night Mr. Braby had re-engaged all the company, and on Saturday night, after going into the stalls to feast his eyes on a packed house—the most beautiful sight in the world for a theatrical manager—he found his way to the local manager's office, called for a bottle of cheap champagne, and assured that gentleman that all the talk in the papers about bad business in the provinces, and the extinction of the theatre by the music-halls and the picture houses, was so much "Thomas Rot."

As for Jilly, there was bitterness in her cup. She suddenly remembered that, out of her weekly salary of twenty-seven and six, she had drawn a

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sovereign in advance. And her share of the bill at the lodgings came to nineteen shillings and threepence-halfpenny!

She pattered home rather silently by the side of the tall Miss Dinwiddy. The supper was laid as usual; on each plate, however, was a small package.

"Mr. Chauncey left them," said Mrs. Pattison. "He wouldn't wait."

Jilly opened her package. For all her monetary troubles she was filled with pleased curiosity. Presents were a great rarity.

It was a leather purse with a silver clasp. "How kind!" cried Jilly, turning it over and over and sniffing at the leather.

Then she opened it, just to count the pockets, and came across something hard in a wisp of paper. The "something hard" was a sovereign, and on the wisp of paper was written, "For the kid who made good."

Jilly looked up and met the eyes of her friend. Miss Dinwiddy was actually smiling.

"Wot's yours?" asked Jilly, half laughing and half crying.

Miss Dinwiddy displayed, with as much indifference as she could contrive, a small photograph in a silver frame.

"It's exactly like him!" breathed Jilly. "Oh, Nelly, hasn't he got lovely eyes!"

"Has he?" replied Miss Dinwiddy.

"You know he has! He's not a bit like a equilibrist! He might be anything—even a—a *panel-doctor*. There! Now I've said it!"

CHAPTER III

TAKING THE KNOCK

I

"Is Miss Dinwiddy in?"

"No, my dear. She went out to do some shopping. Told me to say as she'd be back in half an hour."

Jilly ran upstairs—her legs trembled so with excitement that she would have tumbled had she tried to walk—locked the door of the bedroom, and drew a letter from her little satchel.

"Miss Nipchin,
Theatre Royal,
Ilkhampton."

"What lovely writing!" said Jilly. "How lovely it looks! 'Miss Nipchin, Theatre Royal'! Oh, I'm glad I'm an actress!"

She had been an actress a little over three weeks. Thanks to her eccentricities at Blackborough, "The Stricken Home" was still on the road. Alas, it could not be said to be "running." Owing

to a coal strike, it did not even walk. It staggered along. Still, Jilly had received three weeks' money, Horace was at the home by the sea, and here was a letter from the beautiful panel-doctor.

"Dear Miss Nipchin."

"That's me!" Jilly told the looking-glass, and the shabby furniture, and the chimney pots of Ilkhampton. "I'm dear Miss Nipchin! Miss Nipchin, of the Theatre Royal! Wot ho!"

She would have turned a cartwheel for sheer pride and joy, but there was no room for that. So she did a few "steps" instead, and then went on with the letter.

"Your postal order for twelve-and-six safely to hand. I will send it on to the Home at once. You will, I know, be pleased to hear that your little brother is picking up splendidly——"

Here Jilly kissed the letter, wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her jacket, called herself a silly little fool, and then continued:

"thanks to the sea-air and good food. I am very glad to hear of your success, and hope it may long continue. I will convey the good news of your brother to Mr. and Mrs. Nipchin. Kindest regards.

"Yours sincerely,
"ERNEST STEELE."

"His name's Ernest," observed Jilly to the chimney-pots. "Ernest! I do like the name of Ernest! I think it's the loveliest name for a man there ever could be! Ernest! And"—here she dropped her voice to a whisper—"he's mine sincerely! Of course that don't mean anything, silly! All the same, there it is, written down! And I suppose I can think what I like! It's a free country, I believe?"

The bedroom was too small to hold Jilly after reading her letter. She flew downstairs again, and went in search of Miss Dinwiddy, who was discovered gloomily buying some excellent tomatoes.

"What's your favourite name for a man?" asked Jilly, as they carried the tomatoes homewards.

"I don't know, dear," Miss Dinwiddy responded in deep, despairing tones. "You can't go by names. Some of the worst villains in the world have beautiful names."

"Did you ever hear of a man called Ernest being a villain?" retorted Jilly.

"No, dear, I don't think so. But there must be many Ernests who *are* villains."

"I suppose you think all men are villains except your marvellous Mr. Ed Chauncey, the World-Famous Equilibberist!"

"Yes, dear, nearly all!"

"Well, I know another who isn't, and his name's Ernest, and he's mine sincerely!"

Out came the letter, and Miss Dinwiddy was compelled to read it as she walked along, to the frightful peril of the Ilkhampton infants.

But an even greater excitement was in store for Jilly that very week. The performance was just over on the Thursday night, and she had dashed up to her dressing-room, leaving Mrs. Houseboy panting on the first flight, when her name was bawled from below by the keeper of the stage-door.

"Miss Nipchin, please!"

"Hullo!" Jilly screamed back.

"A gen'lemun ter see you, miss!"

"A wot?" yelled Jilly.

"A gen'lemun!"

Jilly shot past Mrs. Houseboy once again, much to the terror and indignation of that celebrated *grande dame*, and almost butted the keeper of the stage-door down the stone steps into the property-room.

"A gentleman, did you say?"

"Yes, miss. 'E was sorry 'e 'adn't got a card. Name of Steele."

Jilly suddenly felt rather ill. She could not breathe for a moment. For three nights she had dreamt of Ernest, who was hers sincerely, clasping his letter in her hand. That letter had attended every performance of "The Stricken

Home" given in Ilkhampton. It had been to the Castle, and round the shops, and on the tops of the tram-cars. And now, wonder of wonders, the writer of the letter was here in the flesh, asking for her!

Then an awful thought smote her. Horace was very ill! Horace was——! She swept past the stage-door keeper, and, just as she was, in the dress of the ragged urchin, confronted the panel-doctor.

"Is it Orris?" she gasped.

"Oh, how do you do?" replied the startled doctor. Knowing little of provincial theatres, he had expected to be escorted into a sumptuous green-room.

"Is it Orris?" repeated Jilly, her hands tightly clasped.

"Your brother? Oh, no! He's going on capitally! Didn't you get my letter?"

The small face flushed beneath the smears of grease paint.

"Yes, sir, thank you," stammered Jilly.

"That's right. As it happens, I have an aunt living in Ilkhampton, and I had to run up and see her on business. I noticed your name on the bills, and came to see the piece this evening."

Jilly suddenly remembered her costume. She had not even stayed to put on a wrap. Her feet were bare, and—and—What *must* he be thinking of her?

"Oh," she said. "It was kind of you to call, doctor."

"Not at all. I can't honestly say much for the play, but I thought your performance wonderfully bright and jolly!"

"Not at all," returned Jilly politely.

"I had no idea that Mrs. Nipchin had so talented a daughter."

"Not at all," repeated Jilly, and backed away. She would have given half her week's salary for a sack or an old tablecloth.

"I shall certainly report your triumph in York Lane."

"Not at all," muttered Jilly, half through the double swing-doors.

"But I mustn't keep you standing in this draught, Miss Nipchin."

"Not at all," Jilly assured him, and made a fair bolt for it.

When she had undressed that night, and opened her little satchel to take out the precious letter, without which it was impossible to snatch a wink of sleep, she uttered a scream that effectually roused Miss Dinwiddy for her first dream.

"What is it, dear?" asked the cavernous voice.

"My letter! It's not here! It's gone!"

"Are you sure, dear?"

"Yes, quite sure! It's gone! Somebody's pinched it!"

"But who would take it?"

"I dunno! All I know is it's gone! And it said as 'e was mine sincerely! Oh! oh! oh!"

She blew out the candle and crept into bed. For at least five minutes, Miss Dinwiddy could hear muffled sobs from beneath the bed-clothes. Then they ceased, and in their stead came a gentle, regular breathing. Jilly was riding down the Strand in a beautiful motor-car, and Ernest, hers sincerely, was politely taking off his hat to the Queen.

II

Yes, business was very bad at Ilkhampton. The sulky miners had spent most of their strike-money, and preferred to keep the remainder for the public-houses. They could discuss their grievances in the public-houses, so the theatre saw nothing of them, or of their wives and daughters.

There was no "treasury" on Friday night. On Saturday night, the company were told to collect on the stage after the fall of the curtain.

"Yuss!" observed Mr. Jack Titmuss, the little comedian with the upturned nose. "That smells ter me like a couple o' buckets o' soft sawder in lieu of salary. I've 'ad some, thanks muchly."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" moaned Mrs. House-boy. "This is the third failure I've been in this year! Upon my word, what can the profession

be coming to? When Mr. Houseboy was alive——”

“Speaking for self,” was Mr. Plam’s comment, “I’m willing to vote for anything except a return to home and beauty. I’m not saying a word against my old woman, mind! Not a word! The trouble is that she’s too good for me be half. Whenever she tells me so—which is the moment I put me nose around the door until the moment me coat-tails disappear again—I agree with ‘er. ‘Ethel,’ I say, ‘you’re quite right. I sully the home! I’m best out of it, earning money for you and the kids!’ ”

Mr. Titmuss had smelt more or less correctly. The curtain having fallen, and the small audience dispersed, Mr. Braby appeared on the stage and faced his little flock.

“Boys an’ gels,” said Mr. Braby, “nothin’ doin’.”

Quite exhausted by this oratorical effort, he looked about him for a chair, which Mr. Plam at once supplied.

“And what,” asked Mr. Stanley Garland, the leading man, constituting himself the spokesman of the company, “are we to understand by that, Mr. Braby? What do you propose?”

Mr. Braby took a deep breath.

“‘Arf an’ stop. Nothin’ and go on.”

A murmur of dismay ran through the little company. They had to meet the bills at their

lodgings, and their salaries were not so huge that much could be saved out of them. Mrs. House-boy began to cry, and tried to avail herself of the nearest shoulder, which happened to be Dulcie Link's. On Miss Link wriggling indignantly away, Jilly took her place, and the old lady watered the shirt of the "urchin" with her tears throughout the remainder of the proceedings.

"Wot's the good o' goin' on fer nothing?" demanded Jack Titmuss truculently. "We can't live on air, can we? Anyway, I can't, let alone having ter send 'ome 'alf of me salary when I do get it! The thing's a plant, that's wot it is!"

Mr. Garland held up a distinguished hand for silence.

"Do I understand, Mr. Braby, that we shall all be paid in full next week if we consent to wait?"

Braby nodded.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," continued Garland, "that seems to me a fair proposal. We know that business has been very bad this week on account of the strike. Next week we shall be at Longbridge, which is not affected by the strike. We have Mr. Braby's word that we shall then be paid in full. If we refuse this offer, the tour will end, and we shall all be out of a shop. I suggest that the offer be accepted. Will those in favour hold up their hands?"

He omitted to add that he himself, alone of all the company, had been already paid in full.

One by one, their hands went up. The pawnshop was still open, and those who had nothing to pawn hoped to borrow from those who had. Mr. Braby at once left the theatre, and Mr. Plam reminded the company that the train-call was for eleven sharp next morning.

Poor Jilly had nothing to pawn and no money, but Miss Dinwiddy was able to settle the bill at the lodgings. The others managed somehow. At any rate, they were all on the station by ten-thirty, and took their places in the compartments reserved for "The Stricken Home" Company.

Mr. Braby had not arrived. The clock crept on.

"If 'e's done us in," swore Jack Titmuss, "I'll find 'im out wherever 'e is an' break every bone in 'is beastly karkiss!"

At one minute to the hour, however, Mr. Braby arrived. His face was perturbed. He waddled quickly across the platform.

"Get out!" gasped Mr. Braby.

The company stared at him in bewilderment.

"Get out!" repeated the manager. "Wrong train! I've had a wire! Changed the date! Get out! Quick!" It was the longest speech he had ever made in his life.

They all scrambled out, Mrs. Houseboy flinging innumerable parcels on to the platform, and

Mr. Plam bellowing to a porter to get their personal luggage out of the van.

"Changed the date?" queried Mr. Jack Titmuss, thrusting his pointed nose very near the face of the manager. "Where do we play, then?"

"Spennington! Much better date! All out?"

Yes, they were all out, and busily collecting their little belongings. The guard blew his whistle. The train began to move. And, at that precise second, Mr. Braby boarded the train and sailed out of the station!

It was too late, when they realized the trick, to stop him. Jack Titmuss raced along the platform, jumped on to the footboard, and just managed to hit Mr. Braby full on the nose. The manager went to the floor of the compartment with a crash, and Jack Titmuss fell on to the platform, knocking over two milk-cans and a porter as he fell.

III

Then, indeed, there were lamentations and loud curses. Mrs. Houseboy yelled like a railway-engine, and beat the air with her umbrella. Miss Dulcie Link was carried into the refreshment-room in a semi-swooning condition, and Mr. Stanley Garland rushed up to the station policeman and gave the vanishing Mr. Braby in charge. Miss Dinwiddy put a protecting arm round Jilly's

shoulders, and Mr. Plam retired to a remote corner and said a great many very awful things in a quick undertone.

But all these perfectly excusable demonstrations of anger and anguish would not mend the situation. The fact remained that they were nearly three hundred miles from home, and "broke to the wide." They had no beds to sleep in and no money for food, or very little. The men made for the refreshment room by a natural instinct; the ladies huddled together in a waiting room, and either sobbed, or stared at the walls in silence, according to temperament.

Of all this unfortunate little crowd, Jilly was by far the youngest and the least experienced. For that very reason, she had the highest spirit and the most initiative. Looking on at the weeping women and the cursing men, it occurred to her that there should be sufficient ability among them to earn the small amount necessary to pay their fares to London.

Jilly approached the door of the refreshment-room and beckoned to Mr. Plam. The stage-manager came out at once, and Jilly led him to a quiet bench.

"Yes, my dear?" said Mr. Plam kindly.

"How many times have you been stony?" asked Jilly.

"'Eaps," said Mr. Plam.

"An' pulled through it?"

"Betcher life."

"'Ow?"

"Oh, lookin' about."

"Well, we got to look about Ilkhampton, old chap, an' quick."

Mr. Plam shook his head.

"There ain't nothing to be got out of this one-eyed caboodle."

"Ain't there? Don't you be too sure! All these men are out on strike. They came out of their own accord—*we've* bin chucked out. All the week they've been thinkin' of us as lords and ladies, and they wouldn't come near. But if we up an' tell 'em the way we've bin served—wot about it? If we ask 'em to put up a tanner or ninepence apiece, wot about it? There's a sayin' as the poor 'elps the poor, 'an I believe it."

Mr. Plam thoughtfully stroked his unshaven chin.

"We can't beg, Jilly," he observed.

"Who said anything about begging? I don't want to beg! I never begged yet! Wot I mean is, give 'em a run for their money! Put up a show! Let's all do a turn! Don't matter much wot it is! 'Ave a procesh. round the town in the morning with sandwich boards—'THE STRANDED MUMMERS'—something o' that! Ed Chauncey's at Kingsridge—we'll get him to come over an' give us a turn! Get the crowd round and see wot they 'ave ter say!"

Jilly's enthusiasm fired Mr. Plam, and the company were soon round him in a circle. All they needed was a lead. Difficulties vanished into thin air. Mr. Jack Titmuss, it came out, could dance on one stilt, play the ocarina, and imitate any animal in the farmyard. Mrs. Houseboy would wear her black velvet and give selections from *Lady Macbeth* and the Nurse. Jilly, very daring, thought she could imitate some of the celebrities of the music-halls. At the least, she could turn cartwheels, dance, and whistle on her fingers. Miss Dinwiddy could recite "Gray's Elegy" and sing "Three Fishers." Miss Dulcie Link would wear her mauve; if any further contribution was necessary, she would sing two songs at the piano. Mr. Plam would stage-manage. As for Mr. Stanley Garland, he would be happy to act the humble rôle of business-manager.

Exhilarated by the prospects of enormous success and much gold, the company dispersed to return to their old rooms for the night or find new ones. It was a gamble, for a hall had to be secured and posters printed, but the alternative was a more desperate gamble still.

The telegraph-office was closed, but Jilly persuaded Miss Dinwiddy to write to Ed Chauncey and get him to reply by wire the first thing in the morning.

By nine-thirty of the next day came his reply:

"Sure coming over by car buck into it—Ed."

Jilly danced for joy, and even Miss Dinwiddy began to view the situation with a ray of hope.

At ten o'clock they turned out to patrol the streets of Ilkhampton. Mr. Plam had been very busy, and was supplied with boards which bore the following simple inscriptions:

**WE ARE
THE STRANDED MUMMERS!!!**

(See Small Bills.)

**Give us a Hand this Afternoon at 2.30
ASSEMBLY ROOMS!!**

"The Poor Should and Do Help the Poor."

The small bills, to be distributed as they walked, told of their desertion by Mr. Braby, Manager of "The Stricken Home" Co., and gave some details of the impromptu performance. It also mentioned the prices of admission, which were temptingly small.

The procession lined up in this order:

- (1) MRS. HOUSEBOY, with one board on chest and carrying a large umbrella.
- (2) MISS DULCIE LINK, with no board, but several small bills, a sweet smile, and a mauve sunshade.
- (3) MISS ELEANOR DINWIDDY, board back and front, board on shoulders, grim

set expression, hands (full of small bills) stuck straight out on both sides.

- (4) MISS JILLY NIPCHIN, board on chest, mother's best hat on head, red silk blouse (borrowed from Miss Dunwiddy for the occasion), silk stockings with Jacob's ladder in right leg (gift of Dulcie Link).
- (5) MR. JACK TITMUSS, board back and front, board on head, playing, alternately, the Jew's Harp and the penny whistle.
- (6) MR. PLAM, board on head, board on chest, board on back, plenty of small bills, dinner-bell borrowed from his landlady.
- (7) MR. STANLEY GARLAND, no boards, silk hat, coat with rabbit-fur collar, a few small bills, urbane smile.

To say that this demonstration attracted attention in the streets of Ilkhampton would be to understate the case in a highly absurd manner. It caused a great sensation. The loafing men and boys joined in behind, and the women and girls came rushing to their doors. Shopkeepers deserted their customers as the strange procession passed, and horses had to be securely held and lavishly patted.

There was, of course, much laughter, but the little company cared nothing for that. Their small bills were in huge demand, and that was all their purpose. Mrs. Houseboy stalked proudly

along at the head of the procession, Miss Link minced through the mud, Miss Dinwiddy was "quite the lady," Jilly ignored the Jacob's ladder, Mr. Titmuss twanged and whistled like a small ship in a high gale, Mr. Plam rang his bell so violently that the Fire Brigade almost turned out, and Mr. Garland raised his silk hat two hundred and eleven times in the High Street alone!

Just as they had completed their round, and were nearing the Assembly Rooms, where a crowd had already gathered, a black and yellow motor-car dashed up, which contained Mr. Ed Chauncey and all his apparatus. Ed rose from his place in the car, leapt on to the seat, shouted: "'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah!" in what he believed to be the best Harvard manner, and then proceeded to harangue the multitude. Interrupted in this by a policeman, who said the traffic was in a state of congestion, Mr. Chauncey insisted on taking the whole company to the "Golden Griffin" and standing them a lunch.

Never was such a luncheon! With champagne on the table and money in readiness round the corner, the dejection of overnight vanished as swiftly as Mr. Braby in the railway-train. But there was no time for speeches, for the public—the dear public!—was waiting, and Mr. Chauncey had to get back to Kingsridge in time for the first house.

Off they paired, therefore, and away they went

to the Assembly Rooms. Within ten minutes after the opening of the doors, the hall was packed to the uttermost, and Mr. Garland's small leather bag was very full of coppers and small silver.

IV

No need to describe the performance. When any building is packed to the doors with a friendly audience, everybody who steps on to the stage is a genius, and every word uttered is a shaft of the most exquisite wit. Nobody could do wrong. They dubbed Mrs. Houseboy "Ma," and Miss Link "Gertie," and Miss Dinwiddy "Auntie," and Jilly "Little Tich," and Mr. Titmuss just "Jack." As for Ed Chauncey, when Mr. Titmuss went on the stage and told them that the famous Equilibrist had come all the way from Kingsridge to help "a few brother-and-sister-pros." out of a hole, they called the young American to the footlights again and gave him three splendid British cheers.

It was a great afternoon, and the small troupe were wild with glee when they collected on the stage to divide the spoils. Mr. Stanley Garland, who had no bag now, but whose pockets seemed to be bursting with money, first of all warned them not to be too sanguine.

"The prices, ladies and gentlemen, were very

low, and there are certain expenses to be met. There will be thirty shillings to pay for the hall and cleaning; fifteen shillings for the printing, and five shillings for the gas. That makes two-pound-ten to come out of our takings. Mr. Plam, will you help me to count?"

He shovelled the money out of his pockets on to a table. The eager pairs of eyes noted a great deal of copper and very little silver; still, such a lot of coppers must mount up. There had been wild talk, during the afternoon, of fifty pounds, and Mr. Titmuss had looked the hall over from a crack in the proscenium-wing and appraised it, carelessly, at anything from sixty to eighty.

As the counting proceeded, however, it was quite evident that all these calculations were far too optimistic. The silver came to very little more than three pounds; and the coppers, all in little piles of twelve at last, totalled something under four pounds. Seven pounds in all, with two-ten to come off, left four-ten for the company!

There was a dead silence. Mr. Jack Titmuss was the first to speak.

"I don't rumble it," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mr. Garland.

"What I said. I don't rumble it. The bloomin' 'all was packed."

"At low prices, as I warned you."

"Wot prices?"

"Nominally, ninepence and sixpence. But I took it upon myself to let in a good many at threepence and even two-pence."

"Oh, you did, did you? Wot in 'ell for?"

"Because I thought you wanted as much as you could get."

Mr. Titmuss looked at Mr. Plam, and Mr. Plam looked at Ed Chauncey. There was a painful silence. Mrs. Houseboy, right down in the dumps again, began to whimper. Miss Dinwiddy, cold and impassive, looked round for Jilly but could not discover her.

"Well, Mr. Chauncey," said Jack Titmuss, "you know something of this game. What should you 'ave said as there was in this 'all?"

"This is not a guessing matter," replied Mr. Chauncey. "I should like to ask Mr. Garland one question."

"By what right do you interfere?" retorted Garland.

"By the right of a man," cut in Jack Titmuss, "who stood by the crowd and wasn't above appearing on the same platform with 'em!"

A murmur of approval greeted this remark, and Mrs. Houseboy was heard to sob out from the background, "Gawd bless 'im!"

"Well," continued Garland, "put your question."

"I'd just like to know," said Chauncey very

quietly, "what's become of Mr. Garland's bag?"

"What bag?" demanded Garland, who had turned suddenly pale.

"The bag that you had in your hand when I was standing at your elbow during the first part of the show."

"That's a lie! You were never at my elbow!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Garland. You didn't see me, but I was there all the same. And that bag looked pretty juicy."

"If you want to know, I emptied the money into my pockets, and sent the bag round to my rooms by a messenger. Do you dare to insinuate——?"

"And I," observed Mr. Chauncey, still very collected, "took the liberty of sending another messenger to bring the bag back again."

Mr. Garland turned a shade paler.

"You impertinent puppy!" he stormed. "But for the presence of these ladies, I'd give you the thrashing you deserve!"

"If the ladies will kindly retire——" suggested Mr. Chauncey.

"Oh, don't let them fight!" moaned Mrs. Houseboy. "Don't let them fight!"

But Ed Chauncey was taking off his coat, and Mr. Garland was compelled to do the same. Miss Dulcie Link screamed, and retired to a corner whence she could obtain an uninterrupted view. Miss Dinwiddy escorted Mrs. Houseboy to a dressing-room and shut her in with an extra hand-

kerchief and a bottle of smelling salts. Mr. Plam, by instinct, cleared the stage, and Jack Titmuss ran for a basin of water and a piece of flannel.

Garland was the taller and heavier man, but Chauncey was in perfect training—as he was compelled to be. Although they looked ill-matched, therefore, and Garland evidently felt pretty sure of himself, Jack Titmuss offered Mr. Plam “three to two on the little ‘un.” The stage-manager refused to bet, and, as a matter of chivalry, offered his services as second to Garland.

In the dim light of the empty hall, the two men moved warily round each other, waiting for the first blow that would warm their blood. Garland lost patience at last, and attempted to rush the American, who skipped aside with great agility and cuffed his antagonist on the nape of the neck. Garland turned and made another lunge. Chauncey slipped and went down on one knee. Seeing his chance, Garland aimed a ferocious blow at the American’s head. Chauncey bobbed, but could not altogether escape. The blow caught him on the side of the head, and sent him to the stage. But he was up in a flash, laughing and sparring as before. The first round ended in favour of Garland.

They came up for the second round very briskly, and Chauncey got in a neat one on the tall man’s jaw. Garland was furious, and hit out with his right and left. Both blows missed, and

Chauncey, seeing that the big man was beginning to blow, pranced round him again, still laughing. Garland rushed him into a corner, and was thumping him pretty badly when Mr. Plam and Jack Titmuss ordered a "break-away," and enforced their order by main strength. Thus the second round was a draw.

They were coming up for the third round when a small figure dashed into the hall at the far end, carrying a leather bag.

"I've got it!" yelled Jilly. "Here it is!"

The combatants paused, and looked down the hall. Garland recognised his bag and the messenger in a flash.

"Put that down!" he shouted.

"Shan't!" retorted Jilly.

Before the other men guessed what he was going to do, Garland leapt from the stage into the body of the hall and made for Jilly. She shrieked, and dodged behind a row of chairs. Garland tried to pull the chairs away, but Chauncey was too quick for him. Throwing science to the winds, he caught the big man by the collar and swung him round. Then he hit him one in the left eye, another in the right, and gave him a third in the mouth.

"Fight kids, do you?" he panted, not smiling now, but very angry.

"Yes!" snarled Garland. "I know all about you and your kid!"

"What's that?" asked Chauncey, scarcely realising the remark.

"I know all about you—you and that gutter-snipe! What'll the doctor say? And the dear old parents?"

But that was the end of his vileness. Chauncey flew at him, and slashed out at the sneering, evil face. Garland tried to parry, but nothing could stand against the fury of the American. Again and again he "got home," until at last the bully fell headlong amongst a pile of overturned chairs, and lay there.

Chauncey, in a second, was cool and smiling again.

"Now, see here, Mr. Stanley Garland," he observed. "You're the gent that advised this little girl so much for her good that she got the sack. Then, when she made good on her own, you turned nasty. On top of that, you tried to make off with the big slice of this afternoon's boodle. Get up, Garland, and get out of this, or I'll hand you another small dose of the same mixture!"

Garland rose to his feet and Mr. Plam gave him his coat and hat. He slouched towards the door.

"Won't you wait while we look inside the bag?" asked Mr. Titmuss very politely.

But Garland was not inquisitive, it seemed, about the contents of the bag. In less than an

hour, he was on his way to London, vowing all sorts of vengeance.

V

The bag was locked, and Garland had the key, but they broke it open and tumbled the silver on to the table. With the money already in their possession, the "Stranded Mummers" found that they had earned just on thirty pounds in one afternoon. When the expenses were paid, there was enough to give them their salaries in full.

The excitement was terrific. The girls embraced each other, and the men gripped each other by the hand. Then, amidst cheers, all the girls kissed Ed Chauncey, and Mr. Plam put a crown to the joyous proceedings by kissing Mrs. House-boy.

The manager of the hall, meanwhile, stood patiently waiting. He was a bit of a sentimentalist himself, but just at the moment he had an eye to business. When the first transports had subsided, therefore, he stepped forward. Addressing himself to Chauncey, he said:

"I don't know what the future plans of this party may be, but I liked the show, and if they care to put in another two nights at my hall on the same terms, I shall be pleased to accommodate them."

The mummers were ready to leap at the chance, but Chauncey steadied them with a gesture.

"You bet you would!" he replied with a smile.

"Or," added the manager, quickly, "I am willing to consider any reasonable offer."

"That's talking," said Chauncey. "Just allow me a moment to speak to my friends."

"Certainly," agreed the manager, and retired to the far end of the hall.

"Now, boys and girls," said Chauncey, "you've struck it lucky. These things, as you know, happen sometimes in our biz., and it's happened now. Don't miss it. Don't mistrust your own luck. As somebody once said, nothing's too good to be true. If you'll let me talk to this chap, I'll fix you up here for a couple of nights, and get a smart and straight fellow I know of at Manchester to come and run the business end. Where were you booked for this week?"

"Longbridge," they told him.

"Very good. The manager at the theatre there will be in a hole. He's no claim on you, but he'll want an attraction, and he won't get a better one than this in a hurry. I'll see him or 'phone him to-morrow, and fix you up for the last three nights of the week. Then it all depends on yourselves how long you hang together and go on."

The mummers were very heartfull. They felt that nothing but death would ever part them.

Chauncey recalled the manager of the hall, and dealt with him in this way.

"Well, sir, my friends are naturally anxious to return to London, where immediate engagements are awaiting them. But I have managed to persuade them to accept your offer on suitable terms."

The manager smiled and rubbed his hands.

"Very good, Mr. Chauncey. And the terms?"

"You will provide the hall, lighting, cleaning, use of any scenery in stock, piano, and the necessary attendants. You will also advertise the show at your own expense."

"I usually——" put in the manager.

"Yes, I know you do, but this is not any usual proposition. This troupe has made good, and the thing's a cert. You know that as well as I do. I was about to say, you will keep twenty-five per cent of the gross takings, and hand over the remainder each night after the show. Is it a deal or is it off?"

"It's a deal," agreed the manager.

Chauncey turned to the smiling troupe.

"Now, boys and gels, I must be getting back. I don't want no bouquets or floral festoons, or anything of the kind. I guess one Garland's enough to go on with. Jilly, here's something I found in the bottom of the bag."

And he handed her the missing letter from the panel-doctor.

"I didn't read it," he whispered, teasing her.

"You can if you like," said Jilly.

"I guess that's bluff!"

"No, it isn't."

They were alone on the empty stage. The others had gone in search of their belongings.

"Say, kid," asked Ed Chauncey, "was it your idea to send for me or Miss Dinwiddy's?"

Jilly hesitated. Then all her loyalty rose up within her.

"Miss Dinwiddy's," she replied firmly. "If you want to say good-bye to her, you'll find her in Number Five."

"I'll cut along right now. Good-bye, kid."

"Good-bye, Mr. Chauncey."

"Anything wrong with 'Ed'?"

"No, I don't think so. Good-bye, Ed. And thanks ever so!"

VI

Quite late that night, Miss Dinwiddy awoke. The candle was still burning, and Jilly was out of bed.

"Anything the matter, dear?" asked Miss Dinwiddy.

Jilly started.

"No, old girl, thanks. I'm only getting a handkerchief out of my bag."

"All right, dear. Good-night."

Miss Dinwiddy was soon asleep again, but

the candle burnt on. Jilly's movements were mysterious. She got into bed, and placed something under her pillow. Two minutes later, she sat up, pulled the something from under her pillow and looked at it intently. Then, having made quite sure that her friend was asleep, she kissed it.

The something was the little leather purse given to her at Blackborough by Ed Chauncey.

Jilly lay down again, restoring the purse to its place beneath the pillow. Yet still she could not sleep.

"I'm a beast!" she told the ceiling. "I'm not fit to have a pal like dear old Nelly!"

Getting out of bed, she put the purse at the very bottom of the bag, pulled out the panel-doctor's letter, put that under her pillow in place of the purse, and blew out the candle.

Still she could not sleep. She held the letter in her hand, she kissed it, even embraced it. No sleep.

Very cautiously, Jilly relighted the candle, crept across to the bag, recovered the purse, and popped it under her pillow by the side of the letter from the panel-doctor.

Then, at last, Jilly fell asleep.

In a room at Kingsridge, twenty-five miles away, Mr. Ed Chauncey sat staring, resolutely, at a portrait of Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy.

CHAPTER IV

CHASING THE LIMELIGHT

I

MR. ED CHAUNCEY, the World-Famous Equilibrist, was toasting muffins in the sitting-room of his lodgings at Liverton. He sat immediately in front of a large fire, for the month was March, and Liverton can be very cold in March. Mr. Chauncey's face was already toasted, his toasting-fork being a table-knife. A handkerchief was wound about his hand to protect it from the fierce heat of the fire.

On the left of the fireplace sat Jilly, eagerly buttering the muffins as Mr. Chauncey handed them to her. She was six months older than the day when the "Stranded Mummers" knocked Ilkhampton sideways with their impromptu *matinée*. Jilly's hair no longer dangled about her neck; no longer did she parade the streets in mother's hat; her shoes were neat and her stockings ladderless. Jilly, in short, was finding her feet.

On the right of the fireplace sat Miss Dinwiddy. For six months, as a "Stranded Mummer," she

had been reciting the most melancholy poems, and singing the most melancholy songs, in the English language; and always with the success that accompanies the depths of melancholy in these strange islands. Miss Dinwiddy looked well, almost plump; but she sighed as she watched the pile of muffins grow. People had been known to die of eating muffins.

"Well, girls," said Mr. Chauncey, having at last toasted all the muffins and held his face in the passage for three minutes to let it cool off, "so the 'Stranded Mummers' are breaking up at last. That little stunt turned out real and good trumps, eh?"

"The answer's a peach," said Jilly. "Look at Miss Nipchin. Everything I got on, from top to toe, bought new for *me*! The first time in me life I could ever say that. I began to think nobody ever had anything new except the Queen."

"Yes," agreed Miss Dinwiddy, with a groan, "it's been a success."

"And she's got an offer!" chimed in Jilly excitedly. "Tell Ed about it, Nelly."

"It's for repertory," chanted Miss Dinwiddy.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Chauncey, with something like reverence. "Real repertory—high-browed stuff—or just stock?"

"Stock be blowed!" cried Jilly. "It's the Westbury Repertory! Six months with a nop-tion! There—now I've said it!"

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"Splendid!" congratulated Ed Chauncey. "Just the very work to suit you, Miss Dinwiddy. All good plays, a new play every week, and a season in London. You'll be snapped up for the West End before you know where you are!"

Miss Dinwiddy sighed.

"And what about Miss Nipchin?" asked Ed, ruining his performance that evening, and endangering his life, with a third muffin. "Got any plans, Jilly?"

"Nope," replied Jilly. "It's old Ilott's waiting-room for me, and then a nice walk in the Park, and then back to the waiting-room."

"Ever thought o' the halls?" asked Ed.

"Well, seein' as I've spent every blessed moment in the halls as I could manage since the 'Stranded Mummers' got on the go, working up me 'celebrated impersonations of favourite artistes,' I should say I *had* thought of them! But you might as well think of Buckin'am Pallis from what I can see of it!"

"I got an idea the other night," observed Ed Chauncey rather timidly.

"Well done you!" said Jilly.

"I don't know that it's any good," went on the equilibrist modestly, "but you never know. I was thinking that what you want is a little sort of sketch."

"Me in a sketch! Get a mile off, you boys!"

"Oh, not a real play, but a sort of story that

you could work your imitations into. Care to hear it?"

Miss Dinwiddy and Jilly begged him to proceed. But Mr. Chauncey, who thought little of balancing himself on nothing twenty feet above the stage, became uncommonly shy as he expounded his first attempt at authorship.

"Expect you'll guy it to ribbons, girls, but here goes. At present, you do your imitations just one after the other, with no connecting thread. But you do them in boy's costume, which is good. So I thought, why not be a London bootblack?"

"Lovely!" cried Jilly, clapping her hands. "I'd have a red coat, and a peaked cap, and bare feet, and a box, and brushes, and all the rest of it! Can't you see me, Nelly?"

"Yes, dear," sighed Miss Dinwiddy, "I see you."

"Well," continued Ed Chauncey, warming to it, "then you want a street scene—they've always got that in stock in these halls—and the curtain goes up with you sitting on your box reading a halfpenny paper."

Jilly planted both elbows on the table, and stared at the equilibrist as though he were Shakespeare come to life again.

"There's supposed to be an article in the paper about every cloud having a silver lining and all that."

Deep groan from Miss Dinwiddy.

"The kid reads it out, and a gent comes walking in."

"Gent!" said Jilly. "Gent! Am I going to have a company of me own?"

"Well, you can cut out the gent if you like, but it would help the sketch. Round it off, see? Get a local super. Anyway, you can think about that. This gent comes walking in, and you offer to shine his boots. He tells you off and walks out the other side. Then you pick up the paper again, not much believing in silver linings, and come across something like this: 'People have been known to change their luck by pretending to themselves that they were prosperous in spite of all evidence to the contrary.' See? Then it comes to this nipper that he'll do a bit of pretending, and see if he can't change his luck. So he pretends to put on a fur coat, and a top-hat, and patent-leather boots, and all that, and pretends to be driving to the Carlton to dinner. What's the matter?"

"I couldn't never do all that," said Jilly, her little face very downcast.

"Couldn't?" echoed Mr. Chauncey. "You ain't tried yet. I think you could. What do you say, Miss Dinwiddy?"

"Yes, dear, with a little coaching you could do it."

"Shall I go on?" asked Ed, his pride as an author rather hurt by the interruption.

They were all attention.

"Well, you just go through the pantomime of having a swell dinner—you could do the folks coming into the restaurant and all that—and then off you go in a taxi to a music-hall. You sit in a box, and the different stars come on—Marie Lloyd, Harry Lauder, Vesta Tilley—all those you know you can do. Instead of them doing the turns, you do them, see?

"Now comes the finish, and this is very important. Just as you're in the middle of your best bit, the gent comes back and watches you. He turns out to be the manager of a hall, offers you an engagement, you accept, and off you go, box and other traps under your arm. Any good?"

"Excellent," was Miss Dinwiddy's verdict, delivered in a tone, for her, almost cheerful.

"It's a real nailer!" agreed Jilly. "The only thing is——"

"Now!" the equilibrist warned her.

"I wasn't going ter say that, Mister Know-it-all! I was going to say, how am I going to get it tried?"

"You'll have to go to an agent," said Ed. "Personally, I don't use one, but I expect that'll be your best way. Do you know a good one?"

"There aren't any," pronounced Miss Dinwiddy quite finally.

"I should think there must be one or two amongst so many," was Mr. Chauncey's opinion.

Jilly knew Mr. Ilott, through whom she had secured the engagement with Braby, the absconding manager. It was resolved, therefore, for want of a better, that Jilly should present herself and her script at Mr. Ilott's office directly she returned to London.

"It's very good of him to take so much trouble, isn't it?" observed Jilly, as the girls walked home from Mr. Ed Chauncey's lodgings.

"Very," replied Miss Dinwiddy.

"He's awfully nice, isn't he?" went on Jilly.

"Awfully, dear."

"You don't mind his doing it for me, do you?"

"Me, dear? Why should I mind?"

"Well, isn't he—— I mean ter say, I thought he was sort of your speshul property, Nell."

"Nonsense, my dear child. We're just friends, that's all."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure, dear."

Jilly felt, for some reason, relieved. Then she felt sorry, because she had conjured up such a pretty little romance about Mr. Ed Chauncey and Miss Dinwiddy. Then she felt glad again—unaccountably glad. Then she called herself a silly little rotter, and determined not to worry her head about such things.

For all that, at the very bottom of her old trunk was a six-sheet pictorial poster of Mr. Ed Chauncey, the World-Famous Equilibrist, balanc-

ing himself by one hand on the back of a chair, that chair being balanced on many chairs, while his feet were almost out of sight at the very top of the poster.

II

Ilott's Agency was as crowded as ever. They were all there—the old men in the top-hats and mangy fur-collars, and the pale youths in the shabby tight suits and the latest style of tie; the fat old ladies who had played Juliet to the Romeo of every dead and gone celebrity you could name, and the slim girls with wistful faces who had never played anything worth speaking about, and felt convinced that they never would.

There were new faces, perhaps, but the new faces were so like the old ones that the company might have remained in Mr. Ilott's waiting-room, standing to be seen and talking to be heard, ever since Jilly went away with "The Stricken Home." They were all just as hungry, just as hopeful, just as ready with their simulated self-confidence!

Nobody recognised Jilly, but they saw that her clothes were good and made to fit her. Instinctively, they made way for her, and Jilly tasted the first sweets of success in London. She had conquered the waiting-room of Ilott's office; the rest of London was still unconquered.

She had written to Ilott, and he had made an

appointment; apparently, however, he had since forgotten it. Several names were called, and the owners entered the private room with trembling steps, but Jilly waited in vain for the name of Nipchin.

At last Ilott himself appeared, and scanned the crowd. Jilly was well to the front, so she plucked up her courage and tweaked him by the coat.

"Who did that?" asked Ilott rather testily.

"I did," replied Jilly.

"Well, it's against the rules. Don't do it again. You must wait your turn."

"I have waited it, Mr. Ilott. My appointment was for ten-thirty; it's half-past twelve now."

"What's your name?"

"Jilly Nipchin."

"I don't remember it."

"Don't you? Shall I turn a cartwheel or whistle on me fingers? Is Mr. Braby in there? I want a few words with him!"

"Oh, come in, come in!" muttered Ilott, only too anxious to stop her talking. For the story of Braby and "The Stricken Home" had gone all round the humbler ranks of the profession.

Jilly tipped the crowd a confidential wink, and followed Ilott into his office. He was quite alone.

"Sit down, Miss Nipchin."

"Thank you, Mr. Ilott."

"That engagement seems to have turned out well for you."

"No thanks to Braby!"

"You've no cause to complain."

"I'm not complaining. But that doesn't prevent him being a dirty dog."

"You haven't come here, I hope, to waste my time by abusing Mr. Braby?"

"Not much. I'm through with Braby. He's a dirty dog and you can tell 'im I said so." Mr. Ilott smiled. "I'm going on the halls," continued Jilly.

"Oh, you are, are you? In what capacity?"

"Single turn. Sketch of me own."

"Good. Have you got a date?"

"I shouldn't be here if I had."

"I suppose not. You want my help, eh?"

"Yes, as per usual terms."

Mr. Ilott seemed more interested. Jilly was an attractive little person, and still more attractive in her good clothes. She might possibly have found a wealthy backer.

"Tell me about the sketch," said Mr. Ilott.

Jilly hesitated a moment, and then she told him. She had a vague idea that these things sometimes "got pinched," but Mr. Ilott was a gentleman with an office, and would not, therefore, be likely to do such things. So she poured the whole story of Ed Chauncey's inventing into Ilott's ears, and fully expected him to exhibit unbounded delight.

But Mr. Ilott did nothing of the sort. He bit a pen, looked out of the window, examined his nails, and then said:

"And what about the production?"

"The what?" asked Jilly.

"The production—the scenery, dresses, props, and so forth. Have you got all those, Miss Nipchin?"

"Not yet," said Jilly.

As a matter of fact, the question was rather a staggerer. Ed Chauncey had disposed of the scene in a breath, and Jilly had half thought of making the red coat herself.

"You know, of course," continued Ilott, "that managers nowadays expect these sketches to be very well put on?"

"Oh, yes," said Jilly.

"And that you can't expect anything in the way of money unless you carry your own scene, or, at the very least, a front-cloth?"

"Oh, yes," said Jilly.

"Well, then? Are you prepared to find all that?"

"Certainly," said Jilly.

"That's good." Mr. Ilott smiled again—quite a different smile. He was clearly pleased with Jilly. "There is somebody, perhaps, interested in the sketch?"

"I'm pretty interested in it meself fer a start."

Mr. Ilott laughed—actually laughed. The

mummers in the waiting-room heard the laugh, and deeply envied Jilly Nipchin.

"I'm sure you are! But what I mean is, if somebody is backing your sketch, and you care to put me in communication with the gentleman, I have no doubt I could place the whole affair on a business footing."

"Backing it? Gentleman? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, come, Miss Nipchin, you haven't been on the stage very long, but I'm sure you must know that people outside the profession often have a little flutter on the boards if they happen to be interested in some particular artiste. I took it for granted that you——"

"Oh, did you?" Jilly rose, and raised her little chin to an incredible height. "Then allow me to inform you, Mr. Ilott, that I don't depend on the kindness of nobody! I don't want their rotten backing, whatever it is! I'm going to get on in this business, and I'm going to get on by my own work, and anybody that does anything for me will get paid for it, fair, square, and above-board. I gave you the first chance of placing my sketch because it was through you I got my first job, such as it was! But I tell you straight out, I'm on me own, and I've got nothing in this world but what I've earned as an artiste. So you can take it or leave it!"

"Thank you, Miss Nipchin. I think I'll leave it!"

"Very good. But some day you'll come to me, with your hat in your hand, and ask for my work. See if you don't!"

Mr. Ilott laughed a third time, and the crowd in the waiting-room, when they heard that laugh, were not quite so envious of Jilly. But she came stalking out, her chin still extraordinarily high in the air, gave them a "So long, boys and girls!" and went into the Embankment Gardens to think over the problem.

III

The result of her cogitations appears in this wise.

Mr. Peterton, the Managing Director of that great firm, Morning and Dick, sat in his magnificent office surrounded by telephones, and speaking-tubes, and blotting-paper, and calendars, and pen-wipers. Morning and Dick, as you know, have built up a huge business in the blacking line. And not only blacking. Moving with the times, they can brown you or white you just as effectively as they can black you; further, if the decree of fashion brought in pink boots, or blue boots, or green boots—which heaven forbid!—Morning and Dick would, no doubt, be ready to pink you,

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or blue you, or green you within twenty-four hours.

Mr. Peter-ton, naturally, was a very important person. Even if you had an appointment, it took you a long while to get at him. First there was a gentleman who poked his face through a little window marked "ENQUIRIES" and looked suspicious. Then you were handed on to a boy in charge of a lift, who looked more suspicious. After that you entered the ante-ante-room, which was crowded with young ladies viciously assaulting typewriting-machines; these young ladies looked very suspicious. From the ante-ante-room you went into the ante-room, where there was a stern gentleman at a nice desk who looked frightfully suspicious.

Finally, when you were utterly cowed, baffled, bruised in spirit, downcast, and everlastingly wretched, you attained the presence of Mr. Peter-ton, who, to your intense astonishment, was not at all suspicious, but a very affable, smiling gentleman with an outstretched hand.

On a certain morning, shortly after Jilly's interview with Mr. Ilott, you find her stubbornly battling with all these obstacles. Jilly, as you know, had a short way with her when she liked. She thrust a letter at Mr. "ENQUIRIES," snubbed the lift-boy, withered the typewriting young ladies, compressed her lips at the stern

gentleman, and was completely disarmed by Mr. Peterton.

"Miss Nipchin?" said Mr. Peterton, placing a very comfortable arm-chair for her, into which Jilly sank so far that she nearly disappeared altogether, rescuing herself in the nick of time and cautiously perching, henceforth, on the extreme edge.

"The same," replied Jilly, polite though gasping.

"And what can I do for you, Miss Nipchin?"

"It isn't so much that," explained Jilly, recovering her vanity-bag and umbrella, "as what I can do for you."

Mr. Peterton smiled. You had to be very crusty indeed not to smile at Jilly, and Mr. Peterton was not in the least crusty.

"Well, Miss Nipchin, we are, of course, business people. I think you stated in your letter that you were on the stage, and in a position to give us a very handsome advertisement."

"That is so," admitted Jilly, in her kindest way.

"In return for which, I presume, you want something from us?"

"I'm a business person," said Jilly, looking extremely small on the very edge of the huge chair.

"Good. Now we understand one another. Will you tell me your scheme, Miss Nipchin?"

"You've heard of Ed Chauncey, I suppose?"

Mr. Peterton wrinkled his eyebrows, blinked at the ceiling, and muttered "Chauncey?" several times.

"Is he," he asked at last, "in our line of business?"

"Not exactly," replied Jilly. "He's a equilibberist."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A equilibberist. You know—balances himself on a pile of chairs with one hand."

"Oh, yes, yes! No, I'm sorry that I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Chauncey."

"Well, he's mighty smart, and so I tell you. American, you know."

"Ah! A great nation!"

"I should say so. Well, Ed Chauncey's written me a sketch which I'm putting on the halls. I'm on the stage all the time, and I'm a bootblack. Getting warmer?"

"Much warmer, thank you."

"Thought you'd cop it. This kid is supposed ter be outside a big railway-station. You have the railway-station painted on a cloth, see?"

"Quite so, quite so."

"Pretty warm now, eh?"

"Delightfully warm."

"Good egg. Not on'y that, this nipper is dressed like a bootblack, and has the proper box, brushes, an' all that. Hot?"

"Quite hot, Miss Nipchin."

"That's you. Wot about it?"

"Wait a minute. Not too fast. I take it that you want us to supply you with the coat, cap, and box that our boys use?"

"Got it in once. But I want more than that. I want the picture of the railway-station, and you can have Morning and Dick as large as life on it, if you like."

"What would be the cost of this cloth, Miss Nipchin?"

"Fifty pounds," said Jilly, promptly. She didn't know, and fifty pounds seemed a huge sum, but the offices of Morning and Dick were so very grand.

"That seems a good deal," was Mr. Peterton's comment.

"Yes, don't it?" replied Jilly. "But we may as well have a good one while we're about it, eh?"

"Certainly—if we have one at all. Now, Miss Nipchin, I don't want to discourage you, but, as a business man, I have to look at things all round. Suppose this sketch of yours is not a success—what then?"

"Then you can have the cloth, and the coat, and the cap, and the box, and the whole outfit back again. I can't say fairer than that, can I, now?"

"You cannot. I admit it. There's just one

other question. Where is the sketch to be produced?"

"Ah, that's a secret!"

"Do you know?"

"Not yet. But I soon shall know, if you'll put up the fifty Jimmy O'Goblins."

"What is the name of it?"

"You won't give it away? I don't want it pinched!"

Mr. Peterton assured her that the title would be as safe as the Bank of England. Jilly looked cautiously round the huge room to see if any thieving members of the profession had discovered her scheme and concealed themselves in Mr. Peterton's office overnight. At last, reassured, she approached the manager on tiptoe and whispered:

"'The Shining Hour.'"

"Capital!" cried Mr. Peterton. "A capital title!"

"And jer know what I'm called in the piece—the nipper, I mean?"

Mr. Peterton listened breathlessly.

"'Dick Morning,'" hissed Jilly. Immediately the words had escaped her, she placed a forefinger very tightly on her closed lips.

"Excellent!" agreed Mr. Peterton.

"See the point?" asked Jilly anxiously.

Mr. Peterton nodded sagely. Then he, too,

placed a forefinger very tightly on his sealed lips.

"That clinches it, don't it?" suggested Jilly, in her normal tones.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Miss Nipchin. If you can come to me, or write to me, and tell me that you've been offered a week's booking for your sketch at a London hall—I mean, any hall within four or five miles of Charing Cross—we'll put down fifty pounds for your cloth, and fit you out with the kit that we provide for our boys."

Jilly, that hard little business woman, clasped her hands before her chest, and blinked some tears from her eyes.

"On the understanding," added Mr. Peterton, "that, should the sketch fail—as I'm sure it won't—the cloth and the other things are returned to us at once."

"You're a darling," said Jilly.

"Would you like a letter to that effect?"

"About what I called you?"

"No, no!" laughed Mr. Peterton. "About the arrangement we've just come to."

"Why should I have a letter?"

"Just as a sort of contract."

Jilly Nipchin, that fearfully obdurate little business-woman, held out her hand. Mr. Peterton shook it warmly.

"That's a good enough contract for me when

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I'm dealing with a gentleman," said Jilly. "Will you come and see me making a bloomer of it?"

"I shall look forward to the production with very great pleasure," said Mr. Peterton.

IV

"Jilly Nipchin, my dear," said Jilly to herself, as she left the offices of Morning and Dick and made her way, on the roof of a tram, towards Stageland, "keep your head down. If you get it too far up, you may lose it altogether and make a fool of yourself. I don't deny, Jilly Nipchin, that you've done a good morning's work, and you did it all yourself and nobody helped you. But, after all, Miss Nipchin, what's that? You're not Dick Whittington, nor yet the Princess o' Wales. So keep your napper in its right place, J. Nipchin, especially when the tram's going under the bridges."

For all this self-sermonising, she could not repress a lovely little chuckle or two. Fifty quid was fifty quid. There was no getting away from that. Fifty quid would, or should, buy a very nice scene-cloth, and also pay certain other expenses. Now came the great question, how to get a trial week for the sketch? No more Ilott! She was determined on that! And Ilott was the only agent she knew.

Jilly descended from the tram and walked slowly over Westminster Bridge. Up Whitehall she went, and so into the Strand and along the "Actor's Mile." Better known members of the profession have been heard to say that it is less expensive to drive through the Strand than walk; Jilly, however, was safe as yet from the habitual "bob-borrower." That prowling person knew nothing of "The Shining Hour" or the fifty quid.

A familiar face came suddenly out of the crowd—a face that stared, smiled rather wanly, and quickly passed by. But Jilly turned abruptly, crashed into a *grande dame* even stouter than Mrs. Houseboy, cannoned off into a villain who was escorting a heroine into a place of refreshment, wriggled through a group of bepowdered dancing ladies, and gripped the owner of the familiar face by the sleeve.

"No, you don't!" cried Jilly.

The familiar face smiled quite brightly this time, so that, for all the thinness and lack of colour, it was undoubtedly the dial of Mr. Plam, lately stage-manager for "The Stranded Mummers," and, before that, of "The Stricken Home."

"Hallo, Jilly, my dear!" said Mr. Plam, seizing her hand and wringing it as though he were shaking up something in a half-frozen bottle. "I *am* glad to see you!"

"Didn't look much like it," exclaimed Jilly reproachfully. "Passing an old pal like that!"

"The truth is," explained Mr. Plam, "you looked such a swell——!"

"Oh, to Hull with all that!" retorted Jilly. "How's things? What's the news?"

"Well, my dear, not much news. Mrs. Plam and the kids are all strong and hearty, particularly Mrs. Plam. She's a wonder, is my wife! Where she gets her energy from beats me! I know I'm a poor husband, Jilly, and I daresay I sully the home—I think I mentioned that little fact to you once before—but how that woman can tell me off night and day, day and night, at the pace she does—well, she's a marvel!"

Jilly didn't laugh. She felt as though she would like to try a telling-off match herself with Mrs. Plam, but was wise enough to keep her feelings under control. Jilly had seen well-meaning people interfering between man and wife in York Lane, and had helped to collect the pieces of the benevolent stranger afterwards.

"Got a shop?" she enquired, not without purpose.

"Shop?" repeated Mr. Plam. "No, I can't say I have, unless nursing the baby, and keeping the twins out of the fire, and buying new boots and clothes for the lot can be called a shop. As far as I can see, my dear, stage managers of experience aren't wanted any longer. All the jobs go to young fellers with a bit of money in their

purses, a packet of 'Woodbines' in their faces, and apartments to let in their heads."

They were standing just outside a restaurant where steaks, chops, sausages, and other maddening things are cooked in the window. Jilly took Mr. Plam by the arm and led him towards the door.

"Come into the office," she said.

"Eh? Oh, no, thanks, Jilly. I had *such* a breakfast!"

"Breakfast be blowed! Will you or will you not come into the office? I've got straight business to talk to you!"

"Oh, if that's it——" And they entered the food-shop.

Jilly put Mr. Plam into a corner, and went to order blotting-paper and ink. These presently arriving, the blotting-paper looked remarkably like a Porterhouse steak, and the ink was served up in pewter-pots.

"Now," explained Jilly, "we can get to work. Just put this down, Mr. Secretary, will you?"

So Mr. Plam, despite his splendid breakfast, consumed half the blotting-paper, whilst Jilly consumed the other (and smaller) half. As for the ink, no secretary in the world could have shown greater appreciation of that fluid. Jilly smiled happily as the bottom of the pewter-pot grew nearer and nearer to the ceiling.

"Now for the ceiling-wax," she suggested, and

made the secretary hold that substance to the flame of a match. If it smelt more like a cigar than ordinary ceiling-wax, that was nobody's business but their own.

Then, and not till then, did Jilly tell Mr. Plam all about the sketch, and the visit to Morning and Dick, and Mr. Peterton's offer, and the fifty quid. Mr. Plam was so excited when he heard all this news—especially the news of the fifty quid—that he wanted to rush off at once to a man he knew who was the acting-manager of a music-hall in the neighbourhood of Shoreditch.

"Bertie Nutkins!" Mr. Plam informed her, breathing the information with the enthusiasm that carries conviction. "P'r'aps you know the name?"

"I think I've heard it," replied Jilly.

"Charming chap! Full of enterprise! Bound to come out on the roof some day! No side! Directors think the world of 'im! I 'appen ter know that! Now, say the word, Jilly, and I'll see 'im to-night at the first house and let you know what he says first thing in the morning!"

"First thing in the morning?" retorted Jilly. "Think I'm made of wood? What's the matter with me coming up too? I can watch the show and meet you after you've seen Bertie."

"Right you are! But 'e's a swell, mind! None of yer larks, Jilly!"

"Larks?" returned Jilly. "I don't understand

you, Mr. Secretary Plam! I keep these people at a distance, my good fellow!"

And she swaggered from the restaurant, to the intense amusement of Mr. Plam, walking with mincing steps, and daintily holding up a skirt that was nowhere near the ground.

V

Mr. Bertie Nutkins, the young acting-manager who was bound to come out on the roof some day, stood in the box-office of the Shoreditch Scala, smoking a cigar. One of his underlings, after a brief parley through the little window, turned and spoke over his shoulder.

"Somebody asking for you. Name of Nipchin."

"Oh, yes! I know!"

Mr. Bertie Nutkins was through the little door that led to the vestibule like a flash of lightning. To Mr. and Mrs. Nipchin and Orris, who stood in a small and humble row awaiting the manager's pleasure, this sudden appearance seemed almost supernatural. And what a gorgeous appearance Mr. Bertie Nutkins presented! Being Monday night, and the first house, his shirt, collar, and tie gleamed with irrepressible whiteness! Orris, open-mouthed, was quite sure that he had never seen so splendid a gentleman!

No dress-coat could possibly have been more perfectly moulded to the figure! No dress-trousers could possibly have been more carefully creased! No patent-leather boots could possibly have been shinier! And as for the waistcoat-buttons and the front-studs of Mr. Bertie Nutkins, Orris fully expected to see some miscreant of Shoreditch dash in from the street and forthwith wrench those ravishing jewels from the very person of the young acting-manager! No wonder that the Directors thought the world of Mr. Nutkins! Come out on the roof, indeed! The marvel was that he did not straightway take flight for the vault of heaven.

"Mrs. Nipchin?" exclaimed Mr. Bertie Nutkins, raising his glossy silk hat with the left hand, and shaking Jilly's mother with the right until she quivered again. "*Good* evening! Mr. Nipchin? *Proud* to meet you, sir! Master Nipchin? I have heard about you, my lad!"

He dashed at the window of the box-office.

"Box B, Mr. Taylor, if you please!"

Mr. Taylor, without the slightest hurry or interest or change of expression, tore a little red ticket from his book, and handed it through the window. Mr. Bertie Nutkins scribbled on it, and passed it, with a low bow, to Mr. Nipchin.

"Box B, sir! Our best box! I'll show you the way, if you'll allow me!"

He darted off, followed by the Nipchin party,

who could do nothing but scramble up the stairs and mutter breathlessly, "A box! Did you 'ear that? Well, I never!"

Arrived in the box, Mr. Bertie Nutkins called for three programmes and a pound of chocolates. Mrs. Nipchin cried a little as she removed her bonnet, but dried her eyes to read the following item on the programme:

7.

JILLY NIPCHIN

Eccentric Comedienne; in
An Entirely New Scena, Entitled,
"THE SHINING HOUR"

Scene: The Exterior of Waterloo Railway Station

"Wot's that as they calls 'er?" asked Mrs. Nipchin, crying quite comfortably again now that her eyes were not required for the purposes of reading.

"'Eccentric Comedienne,'" read Orris.
"What's that, dad?"

"A comedienne," explained Mr. Nipchin, "is a comedienne. There's no other name for 'em—leastways, not in a box. The gallery 'ave bin known ter miscall 'em. An' 'entric—well, that describes ahr Jilly to a T!"

"Yes, indeed it does!" sobbed Mrs. Nipchin. "An' wot it'll lead to nobody knows! Di'mond studs an' wot not! It's a un'althy atmosphere, say wot you may!"

"Speaking for self," replied Mr. Nipchin, "I

don't see much wrong with the atmosphere. But I'd give the chap as painted that there act-drop six months, an' chance it!"

"I should like to go round and see Jilly!" said the promising Orris.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" replied his mother, placing a large and somewhat tear-stained chocolate in her mouth. "The poor child must be all of a twitter as it is without you falling over all the 'lectric wires an' settin' the theaytre on fire!"

Mr. Bertie Nutkins, in the meantime, had shot through the pass-door and knocked, smartly but reverentially, at the door of Jilly's dressing room.

"Miss Nipchin?"

"Hello!" called Jilly.

"Have you a moment?"

The door was flung open, and Mr. Nutkins found himself confronted by a small boy with bare feet and partially bare legs, clad in ragged breeches, an old shirt open at the neck, a red coat with "M. and D." on the collar, and a peaked cap bearing the full inscription, "Morning and Dick." Jilly's hair, of course, had completely disappeared beneath a tousled boy's wig. One or two smears of dirt on the face was all her make-up.

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Bertie Nutkins. "Splendid! You'll knock 'em silly, Miss Nipchin! I'm sure you will!"

In any case, it was pretty evident that Jilly had already knocked Mr. Bertie Nutkins silly.

"Thanks muchly," replied Jilly, and then they both tapped their heads with their knuckles, quite solemnly, to ward off the ill-luck that comes of boasting.

"Your father and mother have arrived, Miss Nipchin, and your brother. I've put them in Box B on the O. P. side."

"Good gracious! Mother in a box! She'll fall out with pride if she doesn't weep herself into a trance! Many thanks, Mr. Nutkins."

"Anything more I can do for you, Miss Nipchin?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"I shall be in front, of course, to see your show."

"Poor lamb!"

"And I've got one or two useful men coming up during the week—not to-night, but when you're easy in it."

"Good egg!" said Jilly, thanking him with a look.

Mr. Nutkins then sped back to the front of the house, and Jilly had a final conference with Mr. Plam, who was almost unrecognisable in a frock-coat, fancy trousers, top-hat, gloves, and cloth-topped boots.

"It's half the battle to put it on well," Mr. Plam had explained. "You've got a lovely new

scene-cloth, and I must live up to it." So he had ransacked the theatrical costumiers and second-hand clothes-shops, finally procuring the entire outfit for fifteen shillings. Add a close shave, plenty of make-up, and a "swell" accent, and he had no doubt of scoring the acting success of his life with his eight lines.

The excitement in Box B when No. 7 went up was not shared by the rest of the audience. The First House on a Monday is a critical house. It has a great idea of its own importance. It knows very well that, by its verdict, the performers stand or fall for the remainder of that week.

The First House consulted its programme to see what No. 7 might be, and the first house was plainly disappointed. A music-hall audience loves nothing better than a familiar name. A favourite in rubbish is an infinitely safer card than a stranger in a turn of real merit.

The First House put on its critical cap and sat back. It saw a nice picture of Waterloo Station. That was all right as far as it went. It saw, in front of the station, a bootblack sitting on his box and reading a newspaper.

The bootblack began to talk, and the First House listened. It was something about every cloud having a silver lining. The First House was clearly bored. It had not come there and paid good money to be preached at. A man in a top-hat strolled on, said a few words—almost in-

audible from nervousness—and went off. The First House began to titter, unkindly.

The bootblack was now acting—apparently imitating swells coming into a restaurant. The First House had lost the drift of the story, and became impatient. The unkind titters grew louder. After a certain line, somebody in the gallery shouted, “Nort in these trahsies!”—a reference to Jilly’s ragged breeches—and the First House laughed outright.

Mr. Bertie Nutkins, very excited, told his attendants to shout “Order! Order!” A bad move. The First House began to “get its back up.” To add to the misfortunes, the stage had been darkened so that Jilly might have the benefit of the single “spot lime.” But the lime was always just behind her, or just in front of her, or just to the right or left of her.

Growing impatient herself, Jilly deliberately sprang into the limelight. No sooner had she done this than the lime again deserted her. The First House laughed louder. Jilly’s blood was up, and she followed the lime. Still the lime eluded her. The house roared. Then, though she was acting all the time, the sketch developed into a contest between Jilly and the limelight man. Wherever the light went, Jilly followed it; yet, fast as she followed it, the light was faster.

The audience yelled. Clearly, they preferred this to the real entertainment. Shouts of encour-

agement resounded from all sides. Not a word of the dialogue could be heard. Mr. Bertie Nutkins, that astute young manager, suddenly realised that the turn had developed from failure into success. He was right, too. The captious First House had seen something new, silly, grotesque. Your uneducated Londoner loves the silly grotesque. The curtain came down to real applause, and Jilly had two good calls—during which two bouquets were handed up to her. The first bore the card of Mr. Bertie Nutkins; the second that of Ed Chauncey.

Mr. Nutkins rushed round to the stage—to find Mr. Plam hauling the limelight-man off his perch by the legs.

"What's the matter?" demanded the young manager.

"'E done it for the purpose!" shouted the infuriated Plam. "'E done it to queer us! 'E's bin got at, sir! I'll smash 'is blinkin' face in, see if I don't!"

"Are you dissatisfied?" asked the manager of Jilly.

"Well," Jilly was compelled to admit, "we never rehearsed it that way, but it seemed to go all right."

"We'll talk about that later," said Mr. Nutkins. He turned to "limes." "As for you, go and draw your week's money and clear out of this theatre!"

The man was moving off when Jilly stopped him.

"Mr. Nutkins," she begged, "please don't give 'im the sack! It would bring me bad luck—I know it would! Besides, I want him to do it again for the next house."

They had all moved up stage, for another turn was in progress. Mr. Nutkins insisted that discipline must be maintained, and Jilly continued to plead for the culprit. At last the manager offered to give the man another trial if he would confess the name of the seducer.

The fellow hesitated, and then, touched, perhaps, by Jilly's kindness in pleading for him, muttered:

"Dunno 'is nime! 'E give me a quid, an' there was ter be another o' the same if I queered the turn. *And* a better job elsewhere. I was a mug—that's wot it comes to."

"What was this man like?" asked Plam quickly.

"Tall, lanky, funny eyes, 'igh bridge to 'is nose. In the perfesh, I shud sye."

"Garland!" exclaimed Jilly and Plam together. Their old friend of "The Stricken Home" Co. had followed them up and done his little best.

"Get back on your perch," said Mr. Bertie Nutkins to "limes," "and thank this lady for it!"

"Oh, chuck that!" exclaimed Jilly. "You work it as well for the rest of the week, old son, and you shall get the other quid just the same! Plam,

you want a drink. Send out for a bottle of the best. Mr. Nutkins, would you be so good as to fetch those swells out of Box B round to my dressing-room? Plam, don't forget some ginger-pop for Orris! And six glasses, Plam! If it never happens again, we've hit 'em, more by luck than judgment, at the Shoreditch Scala first house Monday! And if I don't swank it up in the *Stage*, the *Era*, the *Encore*, the *Performer* and the rest, may I never have the name of Jilly Nipchin on the bills again!"

She ran into her room and banged the door. The dresser thought she was crying, but dressers—even dressers—are sometimes wrong. Jilly was kissing Ed Chauncey's bouquet, and writing out a telegram to the giver thereof.

CHAPTER V

"SEALSKIN PIANOS" *

I

MR. NIPCHIN, his duties as stage-hand at the Waterloo Theatre—otherwise known as the 'Loo—finished for the evening, lighted his pipe, turned up his coat-collar, nodded a good night to the ancient stage-doorkeeper, and plodded away through the rain to the little shop in York Lane where Mrs. Nipchin sold cheap cigarettes and cheap literature, at a slight loss, to the British public.

Mr. Nipchin let himself in with his latch-key, and proceeded through the shop into the parlour, where he found Jilly sitting over the fire with a writing-pad and a stump of pencil.

"'Ullo, my lass!" said Mr. Nipchin, eyeing with satisfaction the preparations for a hot supper—sure sign of one of Jilly's visits. "All alone? Where's yer mother?"

"Gone to bed, dad."

"Wot for?"

"Said she wanted to have a good cry."

* Music-hall term for great wealth.

"Wot about?"

"Oh, just for fun, I suppose."

"She'd better be 'alf take to drink. Less weakenin' fer 'erself, an' cheerfuller fer those as 'as ter live with 'er. Got a bit o' supper fer the old man?"

"Tripe and onions, dad."

"Nort ser dusty. Let's 'ave it, lass."

Mr. Nipchin sat down to the tripe and onions, and Jilly went on with her scribbling. There was silence in the little parlour, save for the ticking of the clock and the clash of battle between Mr. Nipchin and his favourite dish. At last, however, he sat back, poured out the final pint of "'alf-an'-'alf," and filled the final pipe.

"Writin'?" asked Mr. Nipchin pleasantly.

"Yes, dad."

"Writin' a play?"

"No, dad. I'm doing my accounts."

"Rather a decent job, eh, Jilly?"

"Dunno so much about that. I'm not getting on, dad."

Mr. Nipchin smiled comfortably, and began to unlace his boots.

"Oh, so that's the lay, is it? Not getting on, eh? Ten quid a week fer forty weeks, mind, an' she ain't getting on! Orl right, my gal. 'Ave it yer own way. On'y don't ferget the dorg as dropped the bone fer the shadder. Thet's orl."

"Look here, dad. I know you think I'm making a fortune because I've been on tour forty weeks with my little sketch. But I'm not, and so I tell you straight. How much money would you say I had in the Savings Bank?"

Mr. Nipchin knitted his brows and considered the matter. Suddenly he shot out, with the air of one who didn't care much though he should be written down a madman:

"Two 'undered pun!"

Jilly shook her head.

"One 'undered?" amended Mr. Nipchin.

Again she shook her head.

"Fifty?"

"Not even fifty, dad. About seventeen quid—that's all."

Mr. Nipchin smoked a while in silence. Then he delivered judgment.

"Well, my gal, the money's yer own, earned fair an' square, an' you've every right ter blew it or do it in just as seems good in yer own eyesight. But four 'undered quid in less than a year! Four 'undered luvly Jimmy O'Goblins! You an' Orris *must* 'ave 'ad a beano!"

"You don't understand, dad! The ten quid isn't all clear profit. Just run yer eye over this account an' you'll soon see what I mean."

Mr. Nipchin put on his spectacles, took the piece of paper, and read as follows:

"SEALSKIN PIANOS"

135

"THE SHINING HOUR"

	£.	s.	d.
Gross recipes per week.....	10.	0.	0
Paid to Orther (Ed. Chauncey, Esq.)	1.	0.	0
Mr. Plam (Stage-Manager).....	2.	0.	0
Raleway Fares (ruffly).....	1.	0.	0
Tips and etc.....	10.	0	
Sent to mother.....	1.	0.	0
Total	5.	10.	0
Left	4.	10.	0

PRIVIT

	£.	s.	d.
Digs. and Grub (Orris and Me)....	2.	10.	0
Togs (self—say)	10.	0	
Togs (Orris—say)	5.	0	
Pocket-Money (Orris).....	2.	0	
G. N. W.....	7.	6	
Total	3.	14.	6
Paid into Post Office.....	15.	6	

Week ending June 16.

(Signed) · J. NIPCHIN.

Mr. Nipchin studied this document for several minutes. Then he inquired: "Wot's 'G. N. W.' mean, Jilly? One o' them railways up North?"

"No, dad. That just means, 'God knows where.' All the odds and ends, see?"

Mr. Nipchin nodded. A good many items of his own daily expenditure went down to G. N. W.

"Well," was his verdict, handing the paper back to Jilly, "I can't find much fault with that balance-sheet. I suppose you must 'ave yer brother with yer?"

"Looks better," said Jilly, "and it does him good. Besides, he's learning the ropes."

"Oh, 'e is, is 'e? An' wot about this quid you pays ter Chauncey?"

"He didn't want to take it, but I made him. After all, he wrote the sketch, and I don't wish to be beholden to nobody. The trouble is that I can't get a decent town-date for it, and you can go on playing round the 'smalls' till you're ninety without getting any nearer London."

They mused over this problem in silence. Mr. Nipchin sought inspiration in his pipe, and Jilly in the flames of the fire.

A sudden rap at the outer door nearly startled them out of their wits, for the hour was late. Jilly darted through the shop to see what was the matter. A District Messenger, with streaming cape, blinked in at her.

"Miss Nipchin live 'ere?"

"That's right."

"Note for 'er. Wait answer."

Jilly told the boy to come in out of the wet whilst she read the note.

"Green's Hotel:

"June 20.

"Dear Jilly:

"I had a bit of a fall to-night at the end of my turn, and must lie by for the rest of the week. Can you deputize for me Mayfair Stadium tomorrow and on? I've told them about you and it will be all O.K. if you can.

"Yours, Ed."

"I'll take the answer!" cried Jilly. "Dad! Give this kid a tanner, will you? I must pop out for half an hour. Don't sit up, and you needn't bother mother."

"Tanner?" repeated Mr. Nipchin dazedly. "Pop out! Why it's pouring cats and dogs!"

But Jilly was muffled to the eyes and in the street before he knew what had happened. She ran to the end of York Lane, and was just in time to see a man stepping into a taxi.

"Hi!" yelled Jilly.

The man turned.

"Matter of life and death!" panted Jilly. "You going far, sir?"

"Only home, Miss Nipchin."

"Love us if it ain't Dr. Steele! Here's a bit of luck! I say, Ed Chauncey's fallen off his

chairs and hurt himself! Could you come along?"

"Why, certainly," said the panel-doctor.

"Bless yer kind eyes! Green's Hotel, Edgar Street, cabby, and the quicker she travels the better for you, my lad!"

The door banged, the driver bumped through his gears, the horn tooted, and the puddles swished! They were off!

II

"Did you say Chauncey?" asked Dr. Steele, as they skidded and side-slipped over Waterloo Bridge.

"That's right—the famous equilibberist. You must have heard of him?"

"Oh, rather!" said the panel-doctor, to whom the name was entirely new.

"I had a note from him not ten minutes ago. He's at the Mayfair Stadium this week, and he had a fall to-night, second house, and sent to see if I could deputize for him rest of the week. 'Bit of a fall' was 'is words, but I want to find out for meself. It's a very dangerous act, yer know, and I've bin expectin' this a long time. Ed's that venturesome—thinks he can do anything with them blessed old chairs of his! I wish he'd chuck it and take to something safer. Dogs, or seals, or

vanishing pigeons—anything of that. He could soon pick it up. Got brains, has Ed. But he's that obstinate there's no telling 'im anything for his own good. You know the sort?"

"Very well," replied the doctor, smiling to himself in the darkness of the cab. Jilly's little secret was already an open book.

Arrived at Green's Hotel, Jilly kept the cab waiting, and she and the doctor, after explanations and consultations, were admitted to the hall. Then followed more interrogations, and at last it occurred to the night-porter, noted as a brainy fellow, to go upstairs and see what Mr. Chauncey had to say.

"Old-fashioned place, this," commented the doctor whilst they waited. "No lift, of course, and no telephones, apparently, to the bedrooms. Very few of such quaint hotels left in London."

"I shouldn't trouble if there was none left," replied Jilly. "Keeping people standing about like this!"

A low whistle from the first-floor landing attracted their attention. The night-porter was leaning over the banisters, very red in the face, and beckoning them, in a mysterious manner, to ascend.

"If the lady wouldn't mind waiting in the sit-in'-room a few minutes," whispered the night-porter hoarsely, "Mr. Chauncey would like a word with the doctor fust!"

"Is he much hurt?" whispered Jilly anxiously.

"Eh?" whispered the night-porter.

"Is Mr. Chauncey much hurt?"

"That's right," whispered the night-porter.

"If you'll wait in the sittin'-room, miss, Mr. Chauncey 'ud like a few words with this gen'leman fust."

He showed her into a wee sitting-room, with a bedroom opening out of it. Jilly tried to allay her anxiety by studying nineteen photographs of herself in public and private life with which the mantelpiece was adorned.

A murmur of voices from the bedroom. She could easily distinguish Ed's soft drawl with its slight and pleasant American twang. He could speak, then! Thank God for that!

At last the doctor opened the door of the bedroom and signalled her to join them. Ed was in bed, a dressing-gown about his shoulders, a cigarette between his fingers, and a glass of something refreshing at his elbow. His hair was neatly brushed, and he looked anything but a cripple.

"Why, Jilly, old girl," he exclaimed, "this is mighty good of you! I never meant you to turn out at this time of night—and such a nigger of a night! I'd have waited till the morning if I'd thought you——"

"Chuck it!" interrupted Jilly. "What's the news, doctor? Have you examined him?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dr. Steele. "It's nothing

very serious, Miss Nipchin. No bones broken. Just a—a bit of a twist."

"But I can't go on for the rest of the week," struck in Ed. "Can I, doc?"

"I should advise Mr. Chauncey to remain where he is for the present," said the doctor.

"There you are!" cried Ed, with something almost like enthusiasm. "So you'll have to depu-tize for me, Jilly! Won't she, doc?"

"That I must leave to Miss Nipchin," observed the doctor, and he began to take an extraordinary interest in the pictures.

"You know I will," said Jilly.

"That's good of you, old girl."

"Oh, Thomas Rot! You know it's a fine chance for me! But I wish it 'ad come some other way. Poor old Ed!"

She spoke softly, feeling almost maternal. He looked so boyish, lying there in his dressing-gown. Jilly even ventured to seat herself at the foot of the bed.

"If you'll be round there at eleven o'clock," Ed instructed her, in a curiously matter-of-fact tone, "and ask for Mr. Herbert, the manager, he'll fix up terms and all that, and then take you round to see Prendergast, the stage-manager. You'll find them both fine chaps—old pals of mine. You'd better pop back home now, old girl. So long, and all the best to-morrow night!"

"Sure there's nothing I can do for you now?" she asked a little wistfully.

"Not a thing, thanks. Don't you worry. I shall be as right as a trivet in a few days."

Still that strange tone! Was he cross with her for being so impetuous? Jilly felt considerably chastened when she climbed back into the cab with the panel-doctor.

"By the way," said Dr. Steele, when he had again assured her that there was nothing at all serious the matter with Chauncey, "what has become of that rather tall young lady who was in your company when I visited Ilkhampton?"

"You mean Miss Dinwiddy?" asked Jilly, instinctively pricking up her ears.

"I rather think that was the name. A young lady with a somewhat deep voice."

"Oh, yes, that's Nell all right. My great chum, you know. She's joined the Westbury Repertory—been playing some good parts, too!"

"I thought her personality might be very well suited for certain characters."

"Oh, you did, did you?" mused Jilly. "Good old Nell! I'll play this up!"

Was it a little twinge of conscience? True, Nell had declared that Ed was nothing to her, but still—well, exchange was no robbery. The panel-doctor had once—in a letter—been "hers sincerely!" And now she was in a cab with him at

one in the morning, and not a thrill! Life was a rum business and no mistake!

"Nell Dinwiddy," said Jilly stoutly, "is going to be one of the first actresses in this country. She's not like me—just a funny little bit. She's a lady, and she's educated, and her dad was a doctor, same as you."

"Really?"

"Yes, reelly. Don't you make no mistake about Nell. She's the goods, is Nell. Not on'y as a actress, mind—as a pal as well!"

"Ah," replied the panel-doctor, a little taken aback by this outburst.

"Oh, yes, there's no getting over that!" continued Jilly. "If you knew Nell as well as I do, doctor, you'd soon see what a good sort she was! *And* clever with it! *And* not a snob like some! If I could see dear old Nell spliced to some decent chap," she concluded excitedly, "swop me nob I'd die 'appy!"

"Ah," said the panel-doctor once again. "This is your street, I think."

"York Lane? That's me!"

She took five shillings from her little bag and pressed it into the doctor's unwilling palm.

"That's all right," urged Jilly, in reply to his protests. "This is my outfit. Thanks like anything for coming along. I shan't forget it. Good night, doctor."

Jilly got out of the cab and shut the door. Just

as the driver was letting in his clutch, however, she abruptly opened it again.

"I say, doctor!"

"Yes, Miss Nipchin?"

"Would you care to meet my pal Nell?"

"I should be delighted."

"No larks?"

"Certainly not."

"Right O! I'll fix that! It's a date! Pop along, cabby!"

Her little head might well be in a whirl as she laid it on the pillow. Much had happened, and much was about to happen. Yet one thought would keep worrying and worrying, like a troublesome tooth. It was this: Why had Ed suddenly changed in his manner when she wanted to be nice to him? Why had he dried up and as good as packed her off home?

What had she done? . . .

How had she offended him? . . .

Men were funny. . . .

And with that tremendous discovery, Jilly fell asleep.

III

Mrs. Houseboy, that *grande dame* of varied and vast experience, was struggling with the strings of her bonnet in front of a broken mirror in a very small and dirty dressing-room at the

Waterside Theatre. The performance of "The Stricken Home" was just over, and Mrs. Houseboy was feeling the want of her bread and cheese and a nice glass of stout.

Came a knock at the door, and the stage door-keeper thrust his face into the room. The expression on his face was one of consternation mingled with reverential awe.

"There's a lady downstairs, mum, asking for you."

"What name?" demanded Mrs. Houseboy, in the lofty manner which never deserted her except at railway-stations.

"Wouldn't give no name. Said an ole fren'."

"I can't see these anonymous people, my good man." Mrs. Houseboy was not really hard-hearted, but shillings, and even sixpences, are hard to come by as your career in fifth-rate drama draws to a close.

"Orl right, mum. But she's a reel lady, mind! Come in a taxi an' dressed as good as Vesta Tilley."

"Good gracious! Why didn't you say so at first? Show the lady up at once, you stupid man!"

Mrs. Houseboy snatched off her old bonnet—her very oldest, for the night was foggy—groped for the powder-puff, found it, dabbed once in the middle and once on each side, conjured up a smile of welcome, trembled, and sank into a chair.

A light step on the stairs, a whirl of fur and petticoats, and Mrs. Houseboy was being vigorously hugged by Jilly Nipchin.

"Well, I never!" panted the old lady, delightfully surveying Jilly from head to foot and back again. "To think of its being you, my dear, after all these years! Well! Did you ever! And so you haven't forgotten your old pal in spite of all your success?"

"Oh, chuck that!" replied Jilly. "Glad I caught you! I've got a taxi waiting, and you've got to come straight along to my place and have a bit of supper! I'll take no refusal, mind!"

"Oh, but, my dear, I'm not prepared for——"

"Prepared be jiggered! If you don't come, Jack Titmuss can't come, and you'll be a reg'lar old Spoil-Sport!"

Without another word, she tucked her arm inside the old lady's, clapped the bonnet on her head, swept her down the stairs, and into the taxi. Jack Titmuss, the little comedian with the upturned nose, sprang in after them, and away they went.

"I saw you were billed for the Kennington Marathonium," said Mr. Titmuss, "and I 'oped we might see something of you. She's not the sort ter ferget ole pals, is she, Mrs. H.?"

"I'll thank you not to 'Mrs. H.' me, sir! Houseboy is my name, as you know very well, and when my poor husband was alive there was no

name in the profession better known nor more respected!"

"No offence," muttered the little comedian humbly.

"No, I daresay not," retorted the old lady. "You may take your liberties on the stage, Mr. Titmuss; that I can't prevent, although I consider gagging a disgrace to the profession. But in private life I'll thank you to remember that I'm just as much a lady as people getting their twenties, and their fifties, and their hundreds!"

"Titmuss," said Jilly, "you're an idiot."

"Jilly," replied Titmuss, "I knows it."

"Then that's all settled." And Jilly devoted the remainder of the drive to getting the *grande dame* into a thoroughly good temper.

The cab pulled up at a block of mansions in the West End, and they ascended to the third floor in a noiseless lift. The door of Jilly's flat was opened by a neat maid, and the little party entered a cosy sitting-room with a table laid for supper. Mr. Jack Titmuss and Mrs. Houseboy glanced at each other, and glanced at the room, and glanced at Jilly, but not a word was said to suggest that they were accustomed to less elegant surroundings. Mrs. Houseboy accompanied Jilly into her bedroom, presently returning with a handsome shawl about her shoulders of which she affected to be entirely unaware. Mr. Titmuss, in the meantime, strummed a few bars on the

piano, checked himself on the point of addressing the maid as "miss," and finally helped himself, in the perfect stage manner, to a large whisky and a tiny splash of soda. After the first gulp, he felt that he always lived like this.

They dragged Jilly's news out of her over the supper-table—how she had deputized for Ed Chauncey at the Mayfair Stadium and made a hit; how she had been booked up for three years at a moderate salary; how she had abandoned her "Shining Hour" sketch, after a while, for a quaint little monologue, half laughter and half tears; how she was nearing the end of her three years' contract and had an offer to renew on similar terms.

"Don't you do it, my dear!" advised Mrs. Houseboy, genteelly poisoning a glass of port in mid-air, and nodding her head several times with great emphasis. "Don't you do it! You've made your name, Jilly, my love, and you're a draw! Take my advice, as one who's spent a lifetime on the boards, and stick out for Big Money!"

The dear old lady, in her palmiest days, had never touched more than two pounds a week.

"That's right," agreed Mr. Titmuss, airily picking his teeth with a wooden match. His manners had become more and more aristocratic as the evening progressed. "Mrs. H.—'Ouseboy, I should say—is quite right. Big Money, Jilly, old dear! That's you!"

"All very well," replied Jilly, "but you can't get over a certain figure unless you simply knock 'em sideways. It's the big chance that brings the big money; that's my opinion."

"Oh, well," summed up Mrs. Houseboy, "it's—Excuse me, my dear. The lobster!—sure to come your way, sooner or later. And how are all at home? Well, I hope?"

"Never better! My brother Horace, you know, has joined the profession."

"You don't say!"

"Oh, yes. The business side. He's under Mr. Taylor at the Shoreditch Scala, and doing quite well. The old folks are still in York Lane. Dad's given up the 'Loo, but I couldn't tear him away from the little shop, so there they are, pretty snug. I often see them, but I felt I had to have a place of me own."

"Of course you had! Only right!"

"There! Now that's enough about me. I want to hear all the news about the old lot."

So Mrs. Houseboy and Jack Titmuss told it together, interrupting each other and contradicting each other in the jolliest manner, without the slightest chance of a fight. Miss Dulcie Link was married and gone to live in Newcastle. She was very well married. No, they never saw anything of her, but she had been observed in front one night, with a black eye. The concluding item from Mr. Titmuss, who *had* called the maid

"miss" after all, and was trying to atone for it by displaying his knowledge of high life.

Mr. Garland was either in gaol or Australia; they were not quite sure which, but had been heard of in both. Miss Dinwiddy, as Jilly knew, was doing splendid work with the Westbury Repertory, and Mr. Plam, as usual, was somewhere on the road.

"And who plays my old part in 'The Home'?" asked Jilly. It being strictly unprofessional to give a play its full title.

"Oh," Mrs. Houseboy told her, with genuine feeling, "such a sad case, Jilly. A little girl named Dorothy Hollis. She's nothing like you, of course; there'll never be another Jilly Nipchin. But she's a nice little thing, and keeps her mother and two little sisters. How she does it we can't think, but she does, and the poor child's as thin as a rake and got such a cough! Every one tells her she ought to take a week out, but she won't. 'Can't afford it'—that's all she says."

Mrs. Houseboy wiped away a sympathetic tear, and Jack Titmuss wiped away two. Then they rose, and Mr. Titmuss begged the privilege of seeing Mrs. Houseboy to her door. This offer being accepted, Jilly telephoned for a cab and insisted on paying the fare before they started.

At her last glimpse of them, Mrs. Houseboy was weeping happily on the shoulder of Jack Titmuss, and the little comedian was patting her

soothingly with his left hand, whilst endeavouring to dry his own eyes and light a cigarette with the right.

IV

The picture of Dorothy Hollis was in Jilly's mind as she fell asleep; it came to her in her dreams; it was with her as she took her warm bath in the morning, put on her nice clothes, and ate her comfortable breakfast.

"Not so many years ago," she reflected, "and I was just as poor as that kid, and playing the same part. But I was strong, and she isn't. So now, Jilly Nipchin, what are you going to do about it? Offer her money? The chances are she wouldn't take it. It's a hard case."

The idea—the Great Idea that was to have such an important bearing on the whole of Jilly's own career—came to her with the act of drinking her second cup of tea. Jilly put down her cup and dashed to the telephone.

"Mr. Nutkins in?"

Mr. Bertie Nutkins had risen to be Acting Manager of the Kennington Marathonium.

"Yes. Who's speaking?"

"Jilly Nipchin."

"Oh . . . just a moment, Miss Nipchin. I'll tell Mr. Nutkins." . . . (Then rather faintly)

"Bertie! Wanted on the phone! Hurry up!

Miss Nipchin!" . . . (Then the voice of Mr. Nutkins, a little hoarse, as though Mr. Nutkins had rolled out of bed and scrambled to the telephone in his pyjamas) . . . "How do you do, Miss Nipchin?"

"I'm all O. K., thanks. Sorry to drag you out of bed!"

"Oh, that's all right. I've been up hours and hours!"

"Yes, I know—last night. I say, Bertie, old dear, I want you to do me a great favour, will you?"

"You know that anything I can do for you, Jilly——" (And then the first voice, in a distant tone) "Oh, come off your perch!"

"Thanks. I didn't know you were married!"

"I'm not! That's my idiot of a sister!" . . . (Then in a muffled tone: "Get out of it, Maggie, or I'll punch your head!")

"Don't hurt her," said Jilly. "Look here, old chap, what time can you get down to the theatre? I want to see you on an urgent matter of business!"

"As soon as you like."

"Say eleven?"

"I'll be there to the tick!"

And there he was to the tick, with a silk hat, and patent-leather boots, and a flower in his buttonhole, and a cigarette. If ever a man was certain to come out on the roof——!

Jilly went into his office, and talked to him for ten minutes very earnestly. Mr. Nutkins rang up his Board of Management and talked to them, for ten minutes, very earnestly. The reply being favourable, Jilly and Mr. Bertie Nutkins went across to the Waterside Theatre, found the two managers, and talked to them, for ten minutes, very earnestly. All being in good trim, Jilly took cab to the home of Miss Dorothy Hollis.

It was a poor enough home—two rooms and a gas-cooker at the top of a dingy, dirty house. The mother opened the door, and the sound of coughing told Jilly that her little successor was within.

"Who are you?" demanded the mother.

"My name is Nipchin. May I see Miss Hollis a moment?"

"What about?"

"I have an important message for her from the Waterside Theatre."

"Why couldn't they write it?"

"Well, I offered to bring it."

"Are you in the profession?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. You want to be able to say she's ill, I suppose, and then get her job!"

"No, I don't. I've got a job. I want to help her, if she'll let me."

"She don't want no charity."

"I'm not offering her charity."

"What's your business, then?"

"I'll tell that to Miss Hollis herself, if I may."

Curiosity conquered. The woman stood aside, and Jilly entered the main room. Dorothy, half-dressed, was lying on a bed in the corner, evidently trying to stifle her cough. Two smaller girls were playing with some battered dolls in another corner.

Jilly begged the young actress not to disturb herself, and took a seat by the side of the bed.

"I'm Jilly Nipchin," she began. "Perhaps you've heard of me from Mrs. Houseboy or Jack Titmuss?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dorothy. "I've often heard of you." She was a shy, gentle little thing, very different from her surly mother.

"I'm glad of that, because you can assure your mother that I'm not after your job."

The girl smiled between her coughs.

"After my job? Why, mother, Miss Nipchin is a star on the halls!"

"Then why couldn't she say so?" retorted Mrs. Hollis.

"Well, for one thing," returned Jilly, with something of her usual manner, "I'm not exactly a star, though I'm not exactly among the wines and spirits, either. For another thing, I don't like shouting about myself on public staircases."

"All right. No offence," muttered Mrs. Hollis.

"It's in this way, dear," went on Jilly. "I happened to hear from Mrs. Houseboy that you were not very well, and would be all the better for a rest. The nipper in 'The Home,' you know, was my first part, and we always love our first parts—if we made good in 'em. So I saw my chance. I'm at the Marathonium, just over the way, this week, and I can fit in my bits there as easy as easy! I've fixed it all with the managers and people. So will you be a little sport and let me play your part for you the rest of the week?"

"And what about the money?" cut in Mrs. Hollis sharply.

"As to that," said Jilly, giving her a shrewd look, "I shan't take it, Mrs. Hollis."

"Oh!" Mrs. Hollis considered. "Well, there's no denying that a bit of a rest would do Dorothy good, but we don't want 'The Stricken Home' people to get the idea she's an invalid. They might find another girl by Monday."

"If they do," said Jilly, "and Dorothy will come to me, I think I can promise her a better job."

"Come, that's talking," admitted the mother. "Thank Miss Nipchin, Dorothy. Why, what are you crying about?"

What, indeed? What should she have to cry about? Yet crying she was, and the tears flowed faster when Jilly slipped from her chair to the

side of the bed, put her arms about the girl, and kissed her tenderly.

Mrs. Hollis, out of whom misfortune and hardship had not quite battered all the graces of life, retired to the other room and called the younger children after her. Jilly waited until the sobs subsided.

"There," she murmured soothingly, "now that's all over. D'you know, Dorothy, I should like you to be a pal of mine; will you?"

Dorothy's arm, very shyly, went round Jilly's neck.

"That's right. I want you to come and spend an evening with me. We'll hop across from the Waterside to the Marathonium and back, and have great larks! And then, if your mother doesn't mind, you must come back with me to my little place, and we'll have some of the boys and girls up, and make a party of it! It'll be a little change for you—especially if you can stay two or three days. And we'll try to fix up something better for you, and all sorts of stunts. What d'you say?"

"You are a—a ripper!" was what Dorothy said.

"Then it's all settled. And you look better already. Say good-bye to your mother for me, and here's something to get the kiddies some sweets. So long!"

Another sovereign went down in the "G. N. W." list at the end of the week.

The chances are, He did.

V

Mr. Austin Dawes, dramatic critic of the *Daily Wireless*, felt a little jaded. He had witnessed three new productions in the West End of London in as many consecutive nights, and was now wondering whether to drown himself or go to a music-hall.

Mr. Austin Dawes lighted a cigar, wandered out of the club, and found himself on the Embankment. One of the plays had had epigrams in it, first stolen and then spoilt; the audience had loved them. The second play had had "costumes" in it, and a hero with padded calves who said "Lud"; the audience had voted him a perfect dear. The third play had been true to life—real people, real dialogue, a really interesting theme worked out in a witty way to a logical conclusion; the audience had been bored to desperation. The river looked good to Mr. Austin Dawes.

But his cigar, for the moment, had attractions, so he strolled over Westminster Bridge, and bore, presently, to the right. A crowd attracted his attention—a crowd pushing its way into the old Waterside Theatre. Austin Dawes turned into

the vestibule and found an oldish man in dirty gold braid crying:

"Stalls this way, please! This way to the stalls!"

"What's the excitement?" asked Mr. Austin Dawes.

"Beg pardon, sir?" The man had heard the question perfectly, but the ears are often quicker than the intelligence.

"Anything special on? You seem busy."

"Busy, sir? I should say so! Stalls this way, please! This way to the stalls! Best business we've done since I dunno when! Stalls this way!"

"Old enough play, isn't it?"

The man stared.

"'Aven't you 'eard?" he asked at last, adding, in a confidential, fatherly tone, "This way to the stalls! Stalls this way, please!"

"I'm afraid not. I come from over the water." Meaning the River Thames and not the Atlantic Ocean.

"Oh, well, that explains it. Why, we've got Jilly Nipchin 'ere; playing the nipper! My word, she ain't 'alf droll neither! Stalls this way, please! Larf? You shud 'a bin 'ere lawst night! This way to the stalls!"

"But I thought she was on the halls?"

"So she is—Marrythonium—just dahn the road. She's workin' both 'ahses. Little gal 'ere

fell ill, an' Miss Nipchin's takin' 'er place for nix! Stalls this way, please! The story got round, and you can't 'ardly get in to either place. This way for the stalls, please!"

Mr. Austin Dawes knew the name of Jilly Nipchin in print, but he had never seen her performance. So he bought a "Standing-Room Only" ticket, and passed into the suffocating atmosphere of the theatre.

A few minutes later, Jilly made her first entrance, and the audience gave her a great reception. As the man in the dirty gold braid said, the story had got round—Mr. Bertie Nutkins may have had something to do with that—and the kindly act went to the hearts of these struggling people.

She played the part in her old way, but her technique was now at hand to help. It was a grotesque performance, a rough-and-tumble affair, a combination of impudence and jollity; but it suited the play and it suited the audience. Mr. Austin Dawes saw the cleverness of it, but he was disappointed. He had hoped for a genuine discovery, and there was no spark of genius in this.

The first act over, he was glad to get out of the auditorium and smoke a cigarette on the pavement. His friend in the gold braid was busily displaying the "HOUSE FULL" boards, brushing the cobwebs off them with the tail of his coat.

"Where else did you say," asked Mr. Austin Dawes, "that Miss Nipchin was appearing?"

"Eh? Oh! Oh, yes! At the Marrythonium—just dahn the road there—where you can see that there bright light."

"What time does she come on there?"

The man scratched his head, removing his peaked cap for the purpose.

"Nah, let's see. She works the first 'ahse, yer see, afore she comes on 'ere. Then she finishes up 'ere abaht ten-twenty, an' gets back there for the second 'ahse about 'alf-past ten. Thank you kindly, sir. Yes, that's the Marrythonium, where you can see that there bright light."

Mr. Austin Dawes strolled on. He had had quite enough of "The Stricken Home." It is to be feared that he found Mr. Jack Titmuss and Mrs. Houseboy a little tedious, but these worthy players were making good with the crowded audience, and had taken a fresh lease of life.

At ten-fifteen, Mr. Dawes was at the back of the circle at the Marathonium, wedged between a fat man with a very vile cigar, and an unhealthy youth who brought the smoke of a cheap cigarette out of all parts of his head until he looked like a damp bonfire.

At ten-thirty Jilly came on. She looked at the house, and the house became as still as death. She held them like that whilst she took some plates from a shelf—the scene was a kitchen—

and then she made one little remark. It was so quick that Dawes missed it, but the house was ready and the house roared. Then another silence, followed by another burst of delight.

She sang three lines of a song as she washed the plates—a simple, familiar little song. Then she stopped, abruptly, and wiped the corners of her eyes with her apron. The fat man with the vile cigar did the same. An instant later, his head was back and his hat falling off with the force of his laughter.

For fifteen minutes the sketch-monologue went on, and a little story was gradually developed. But it was not the story that held the people. It was personality, temperament, genius—call it what you will. In the slang of the profession, Jilly had "got it." Never mind where she had got it. These things just happen.

Mr. Austin Dawes, with the shouts still in his ears, and the picture of the little smiling and nodding figure in his eyes, went out of the Marathonium and took cab to the offices of the *Daily Wireless*.

"Hullo, Dawes!" said Mr. Seabrook, the editor.

"Hullo!" replied Dawes.

"You look excited. Take a cigarette."

"Thanks!"

"Got something good?"

"Yes."

"News?"

"No. Fourth Page."

"Tell me about it in a minute."

The minute over, which meant forty minutes, Austin Dawes endeavoured to impart his enthusiasm to Mr. Seabrook. He failed, but he obtained permission to write his column.

It appeared the next morning but one. It was called, "The Genius of Jilly Nipchin." They all read it. Mr. Nipchin read it to Mrs. Nipchin and Orris, whereupon Mrs. Nipchin wept with exceeding bitterness, and Orris whooped for joy and got cuffed. Mr. Ilott read it, and made a note to call on Miss Nipchin that very night and offer his services for future work—as Jilly had predicted years before. Miss Dinwiddy read it in far away Westbury, and at once despatched a long telegram of warning. Mr. Plam read it somewhere on the road, and also sent a telegram. Miss Dulcie Link read it, and decided to ask Jilly to "stee" with her at some future "deet."

Ed Chauncey read it, and expended an hour and a half trying to get through to London on the phone. Mr. Bertie Nutkins read it, cut it out, framed it, and made a man stand outside the Marathonium with it so that all who passed by should read, at least, the heading.

But, most important of all to Jilly, two people read it who were rivals in the music-hall business. One was Mr. Hovenden, Managing Director of

the Earth Limited. The other was Mr. Purkiss, Managing Director of the United Firmament. Both these gentlemen were millionaires. Both could send a shiver through the Variety World by raising an eyebrow or lowering an eyelash. Each loved the other like a brother.

Mr. Hovenden, having read the article, touched a bell. Forty people at once sprang to attention. Thirty-nine had palpitations, and the fortieth answered the bell.

"Mr. Lobb," said Mr. Hovenden, indicating the paper with the article marked in blue pencil. "Tell him to go to-night."

Mr. Purkiss, having read the article, also touched a bell. Three typists immediately died of heart-disease.

"Get on to the Kennington Marathonium. Tell them I want a box first house to-night."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Bertie Nutkins took the message. He replied that all the boxes were sold. In fact, the house was sold out. Could nothing be done? Nothing.

"I don't know whether I mentioned," said the voice, "that Mr. Purkiss himself wants the box."

"*Himself?*" gasped Bertie Nutkins.

"Certainly."

"Why in the world didn't you say so before? I'll get one back if I have to bribe the present customer out of my own pocket!"

Be very sure that Mr. Nutkins was on the mat when the great man arrived. Be very sure that Mr. Nutkins showed the great man to his box as though he were all the monarchs of Europe rolled into one.

Mr. Purkiss sat through Jilly's turn without moving a muscle. When it was over, and whilst she was still taking her calls, he despatched an attendant for Mr. Nutkins. That young gentleman obeyed the summons so quickly that he nearly killed a constant patron of the hall who was making for the bar.

"Are you Mr. Nutkins?" asked Purkiss.

"I am, sir."

"I like the way you run your house."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"May I have the loan of your private office for five minutes?"

"With the greatest pleasure, sir."

"Thank you. I think I noticed Mr. Lobb at the side of the stalls."

"Quite right, Mr. Purkiss. Mr. Lobb is here."

"I wish to speak to Mr. Lobb. Do you think you could get hold of him for me?"

"Certainly, sir."

"At once?"

Mr. Purkiss looked hard at the young manager, and Bertie Nutkins knew that this was a crucial incident of his career.

"At once, sir."

"Then do it. Take him to your office, and keep him there till I come."

Mr. Nutkins was away like a flash. He found Lobb making his way out at the front.

"Hello, Mr. Lobb!" called Bertie. "Are you off?"

"Just going round to the back for a moment."

"Could you spare me a second?"

"If it's anything important, my boy."

"It is. Mr. Purkiss is here, and——"

"Purkiss? I never saw him!"

"Well, he saw you, and he wants to have a chat with you in my office. Can you come up?"

Mr. Lobb reflected. Eight pounds a week. Twice eight made sixteen. Say twenty, in round figures. Earth Limited had never treated him too well. He was a smart man, and Purkiss had discovered it.

"Right," said Mr. Lobb, and they climbed the stairs.

Mr. Purkiss, evidently, was not in such a tearing hurry. He kept Mr. Lobb waiting, in point of fact, nearly half an hour. At the end of that time, the great man walked in, smiling affably.

"Evening, Mr. Lobb."

"Good evening, Mr. Purkiss."

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I've been for a little drive."

Mr. Lobb and Mr. Nutkins jumped.

"Yes," continued Mr. Purkiss, "I drove Miss Nipchin round to the old Waterside. Nice little turn, Mr. Lobb?"

"Very nice," agreed Lobb, beginning to feel rather ill.

"Glad you think so." He took a piece of paper from his pocket. It looked so like one of the United Firmament's contract-forms that Mr. Lobb had to support himself with the back of a chair.

"And a very clever little business woman," went on Mr. Purkiss. "Three years—forty weeks in each year—thirty-five a week the first year, forty-five the second year, fifty-five the third year. And no agents. That girl will get on if she's careful. Well, good night, Mr. Lobb. Remember me to Mr. Hovenden. Good night, Mr. Nutkins. I like the way you manage your house."

"By the way," said Jilly, talking it all over a few days later with Ed Chauncey, "I've got two bones to pick with you. They've been waiting to be picked for a goodish time."

"Go ahead," replied Ed.

"That night you had the accident. Why did you bustle me out of the hotel like a naughty child?"

"Did I?"

"You know you did."

"Sorry. I guess I must have been in considerable pain."

"Oh, no, you weren't. That brings me to the second bone. The accident was a fake."

"Get along!" retorted Ed.

"You can't spoof me, you men! I put it straight, just like that, to Dr. Steele. He tried hard to deny it, but I read him like an eighteen-sheet poster. It was good of you, Ed, but you shouldn't have done it. And, anyway, you needn't have snubbed me when I wanted to mother you."

"Do you know what it feels like to be a fraud?"

"I might have, but, as it happened, I filled the bill for you all right."

"I know. I don't mean that sort of fraud. I mean, gettin' sympathy and all that when you don't deserve it."

"Oh," said Jilly. "And to think I——" She was about to add, "lay awake half the night, worrying."

"You what?" asked Ed.

"Never mind," replied Jilly.

CHAPTER VI

CAT'S CRADLE

I

JILLY was frightened.

This statement, made of an average young woman, would surprise nobody; your average young woman is very often frightened. Applied to Jilly, it assumes an extraordinary significance. Here is the first time, is it not, that any mention has been made of such a thing as fear in connection with Jilly Nipchin?

Anyhow, she *was* frightened. She was frightened because she had made up her mind to do a terrifying thing. She was going to make a certain communication to Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy, of the sepulchral voice. Miss Dinwiddy, certainly, was still Jilly's greatest friend; that made Jilly's task all the more terrifying.

Yet it had to be done. Things could not go on like this. The happiness of four lives—no less than four—was at stake. If Jilly bungled her self-imposed mission, four people might be made miserable for life. Can you wonder that she trembled as she thrust the pins into her hat?

"Jilly Nipchin," said Jilly to herself in the glass, "you're a semi-detached idiot! You're a little funk and a microscopic blighter! If somebody came and told you at this moment that Nell Dinwiddy was not in town after all, but had gone back to Westbury, you'd be simply delighted! For shame, Jilly Nipchin, you white-faced cat! Is that what you call friendship? Is that playing the Big Game that you've sworn to yourself always to play? Is it? Yes or no, miss! *No, it ain't.*"

"I shall feel braver," she thought, "as soon as I get started. I'll walk to Nell's; it's better'n waiting about here getting me feet more an' more froze! Buck up, my dear, or the lift-man'll begin to think of *his* troubles an' p'r'aps break both yer necks!"

She felt better in the fresh air, as every one does. But she could not help musing, as she walked along, of the great problem to be solved before Miss Dinwiddy returned to her repertory work at Westbury.

"Funny thing," thought Jilly, "all this Love! I never knew I was going to fall in love with Ed. Never dreamt of such a thing. Made sure he was Nell's property and wanted to be. It's Ed's fault, the fat-head! Why couldn't he say straight out whether it was me or Nell he was after? For the matter o' that, he never *has* said which it is! It might be Nell after all! I shouldn't mind! I

should like to see dear old Nell settled and happy. She deserves it, if ever a girl did. So I shouldn't mind. Not a bit. I should on'y drown meself. Wonder what it's like, bein' drowned! Fine ad, anyway! Wonder if Ed would care? Oh, dash the man! And dash Love! Soppo nonsense, I call it! Dash everything but work!"

The window of a photographer's shop caught her eye. Having more than enough time, Jilly stopped to peep in. The first thing she saw, after her own pretty reflection, was Ed Chauncey, the Equilibrist of World-Wide Fame, staring straight at her. Jilly's heart thumped and bumped like a taxi with a broken spring. What ripping eyes he had! And what a nice mouth! And a lovely chin! And what a Something there was about the whole cut of him that made any one——! "Oh, get along, J. Nipchin, and stop yer silly nonsense!"

She found Miss Dinwiddy at breakfast. Miss Dinwiddy informed her, in tones of gloom, that she was quite well.

"Looks a nice part," observed Jilly, indicating a thick wad of typescript, bound in ragged brown paper, that was propped against the teapot.

"Yes, dear, it's a fat part," admitted Miss Dinwiddy with a deep sigh. "Rachel in 'The Bitter Cup.' I've always wanted to play it. Now I've got it I shall ruin it."

"Nonsense! You'll be lovely in it! Just your style!"

"Thank you, dear, but I know I shall ruin it. Never mind. Tell me about your own troubles."

"Oh, I haven't got any troubles." Miss Dinwiddy seemed downcast. "Well, except——" Miss Dinwiddy brightened.

"Yes, dear? Except what?"

"Well, you know the sort of silly troubles that girls have. Oh, why couldn't they have made the world without any men in it!"

"Jilly," said Miss Dinwiddy hopefully, "you alarm me!"

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," Jilly assured her. "Only I've bin fool enough to get rather sweet on another girl's man."

She spoke carelessly, but Miss Dinwiddy was not deceived. She knew Jilly's temperament. If she cared, she would care with all her heart and soul. She would care so much that all her future would depend upon the outcome.

Miss Dinwiddy rose, went across to Jilly, and put her arm about her.

"Tell me, dear," she said gently.

"I don't know as I can," replied Jilly. "Yer see, Nell, it's a bit of a bloomin' mix-up!"

"Is he married, dear?"

"Oh, Lor', no! It isn't as bad as that!"

"Engaged?"

"No, nor even engaged, so far as I know. But the girl's a pal of mine. That's what makes it so rotten."

"I quite understand, dear," said Miss Dinwiddy.

"I wonder if you really do, Nell?"

"Yes, dear, I'm sure I do. I—I wish I didn't."

"Wish you didn't? This is a new stunt! What's up, Nell? What's the game?"

"Well, dear, I'm in something of the same fix myself."

"You?"

Jilly sat back and stared at her friend in horror. If Nell was in the same fix, that meant that Nell was in love with some other girl's man. But Nell was in love with Ed Chauncey. But Ed Chauncey was not Jilly's man. So Ed Chauncey must be some other girl's man! There was a third girl in it! Five all told! Small wonder that Jilly stared at Miss Dinwiddy with her grey eyes opened to their fullest extent.

Miss Dinwiddy, making the most of the situation, rose and walked across to the window. There was nothing in the street worth looking at, so she folded her arms across her chest and stared, with intense gloom, at a dust-bin. The whole attitude was perfect for almost any scene in "The Bitter Cup."

"My!" said Jilly at last. "This is a winner, this is!"

"We are all," chanted Miss Dinwiddy, glaring at the dust-bin, "puppets on the Stream of Time!"

"Betcher life!" agreed Jilly.

"This thing," went on Miss Dinwiddy, scowling so savagely at a small errand-boy who came between her and the dust-bin that the wretched urchin slunk off with his basket over his head, "has been hanging over me, like the sword of Damocles, for months and months!"

"Same here," said Jilly.

"Sleeping it has haunted my dreams! Waking it has——"

"Bin just as much nuisance," suggested Jilly. "I know, old sort!"

Silence. An itinerant musician, sighting his opportunity, pitched immediately opposite the window, right in front of the dust-bin, and began to play "Abide With Me" on the cornet. His eyes, almost starting from their sockets in his lugubrious energy, were fixed intently on Miss Dinwiddy. She moved away from the window with an impatient gesture.

"Look here," suddenly observed Jilly, as though inspired by the music, "I've got an idea! You write the name of your man on a piece of paper, and I'll do the same. Then we'll exchange and see if anything comes of it."

"I know what will come of it," moaned Miss Dinwiddy.

"Wot?"

"Broken friendship, dear! Perhaps broken hearts!"

"Well, let's try, an' chance it! Shall we?"

"If you like, dear."

Miss Dinwiddy produced pencils and paper. Each girl wrote a name, folded her paper, and handed it to the other.

"One moment," stipulated Miss Dinwiddy. "Before you open that, Jilly, swear that the man whose name I have written shall never know of this!"

Jilly wet her finger and drew it across her throat. Miss Dinwiddy, not to be outdone, raised her right hand towards the ceiling. Then they opened the papers.

II

Mrs. Todds, Miss Dinwiddy's landlady, was in the act of drying a breakfast cup when she heard a loud shriek. Down went the breakfast-cup to the stone floor, and up came Mrs. Todds to the front parlour. Throwing open the door and rushing into the room without ceremony, Mrs. Todds, instead of beholding a corpse or two at her feet, saw her staid lodger being violently hugged by a small young woman with reddish hair. For a moment, Mrs. Todds thought the small young woman might be trying to strangle her lodger, but the lodger's smiles, though mingled with tears, quashed this exciting prospect.

Mrs. Todds, therefore, took it upon herself to be cross.

"Well, I never! That's a nice thing, that is! Screamin' out like that an' all about nothing an' makin' me go an' smash one o' the best brekfuss-cups which they can't be matched try where you may! I should be ashamed, Miss Dinwiddy, to have such visitors! A nice quiet ladylike young woman like you! Keep away from me, you mad thing! Don't you dare to come nigh me!"

But the warning was in vain, for Jilly had already thrown her small arms round the waist of Mrs. Todds, and was compelling that lady to execute a slow but undignified two-step, to the accompaniment of the Wedding March.

"Lum-tum-ti-tum-tum-tum-tum, Lum-ti-ti-tum-ti-ti-tum-tum-tum-tum!" sang Jilly.

At last Mrs. Todds, laughing despite her anger at such treatment, fought herself free.

"I should think," she observed witheringly, "as this young person has been indulgin', Miss Dinwiddy!"

"No, I haven't!" cried Jilly. "But you shall, Ma!" She flung half a sovereign on to the table. "There you are, old dear! Send out for something good and wish us luck!"

"Well, reely!" exclaimed Mrs. Todds, sidling up to the table in a shy manner delightful to behold, and, after several false starts, finally securing the coin and slipping it into her apron-pocket. "Thank you, miss, I'm sure! I wouldn't 'ave said a word, on'y it gave me such a fright when you

screamed out I made sure there was murder bein' done or at least robbery with vi'lence! An' when I gets frightened without doo cause it always seems ter make me lose me temper!"

"I'm sorry," explained Jilly, "but I had to scream. Me and Miss Dinwiddy both thought we were the miserablest girls in all the world, and then we suddenly discovered we were the happiest! Isn't that something to scream about?"

"Both come inter forchins?" asked Mrs. Todds, beaming.

"Better than that!" said Jilly.

Mrs. Todds shook her head.

"I can't think of nothing better nor that."

"Can't you, Ma? Then I'll tell you. Love! L-U-V!"

Again Mrs. Todds shook her head. "That remains ter be proved. I 'ave known it go both ways, an' more the other than one. Still, I'll wish you 'appiness as soon as Lizzie gets back from the grocer's, and pleased ter do it, I'm sure. Thank you, miss. In case you should 'appen to 'ave a friend—my card. Good morning, miss, and thank you kindly."

"And now," said Jilly, "tell me all about it, Nell. Fancy you being secretly sweet on my panel-doctor! When did it begin, and where, and how, and why? If you miss out a single word, I'll never forgive you!"

So Miss Dinwiddy told her little story. Dr.

Steele, it seemed, the sly wretch, had been to Westbury no less than seven times! On each occasion he had bought the same end stall, and followed Miss Dinwiddy with his eyes the whole time that she was on the stage! All the company had noticed it! But Miss Dinwiddy had given him no encouragement—not a scrap. Not even a glance when the final curtain was coming down. Why? Well, she hoped she was a better pal than that!

Some of the girls in the company had informed her that she had no heart—that to let a man come all that way, and never even go out to tea with him, was shameful. Let them talk. They knew nothing of the circumstances. If she had gone to tea with him, she would certainly have made herself extremely forbidding. And how would he have liked that?

"You make me feel an awful beast," said Jilly.

"Why, dear?"

"Well, with me it was just the other way. You know what I am—if I'm fond of people I have to show it. Simply must. But Ed choked me off—fairly handed me the frozen mit!"

"I don't believe it, Jilly! He couldn't!"

"He did, all the same. You ask him. So what I want to know is, where are we? Puts me in mind of Cat's Cradle!"

"The thing is this," announced Miss Dinwiddy

after a long pause devoted on both sides to hard thinking; "do you want to marry Ed?"

"Not if he doesn't want to marry me."

"But supposing that he does want to marry you?"

"He's got a funny way of showing it!"

"I expect that's diffidence. You've become such an important little person——"

"Oh, chuck all that, Nell! I'm only on the halls, the same as Ed."

"But getting at least twice the money."

"I don't know about that. Besides, you never know at this game. It's one down, t'other come on. So if Ed's thinking of that he's a fool."

"Has he ever had a real chance to propose to you?"

"I dunno. I should think so."

"Why not make quite sure?"

"How d'ye mean?"

"Oh, come, Jilly, you're not such a little duffer as all that. You know perfectly well that, nine times out of ten, the girl has to make the opportunity. Don't you, now?"

"Well, I'll tell you what. I will if you will!"

Miss Dinwiddy, who had almost forgotten to be gloomy in her interest in Jilly's love-affair, sighed prodigiously.

"So far as I'm concerned, I expect it's too late. I've seen nothing of Dr. Steele for months."

"Then there's no time to be lost. Now, look here, Nell. I'll tell you what we'll do."

If Mrs. Todds was wishing them luck just outside the door of the parlour, with one ear to the keyhole, she adopted that uncomfortable attitude in vain. For Jilly unfolded the scheme that had come into her active brain in so low a tone that Mrs. Todds had no chance at all.

Miss Dinwiddy listened attentively, and nodded a great many times. The whispering over, Jilly drew away and regarded her friend with shining eyes.

"Are you on, Nell?"

"It's a delightful idea, but——"

"Oh, blow the 'buts'! Life's too short for 'buts'!"

"It's rather a risk, you know, dear."

"So's everything. Besides—well, you leave it to me. Are you on?"

"I think I am."

"Hurroosh! Then shove on your bonnet and tippet, and come along with me to the house-agent's. I've got all August free, and so have you. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll have the time of our lives, and the men, bless 'em, can go and boil their heads!"

III

"What kind of a house," asked the house-agent, "were you requiring, miss? We have a large number of furnished houses on our books. I've got a very nice place here in Hertfordshire—fourteen bedrooms, four recep——"

"Now, look here, young man," replied Jilly impressively. "I don't know if your time's valuable, but mine is, and I don't wish it wasted. Is that house in Hertfordshire on the river?"

"Well, no, miss. I can't say it's on the river. Is the river *sine qua non*?"

"I don't care tuppence what river it is so long as we can have a boat on it, and swim in it, and all that. And I don't want fourteen bedrooms, because me and my friend never sleep in more than two at a time, and we're neither of us married—yet—so there'll be no children. There'll be an old lady staying with us for chaperon, and there'll be a cook and a maid, and if there's another room or two for my old folks and my young brother, in case any of 'em should feel like a breath of country air, that's as much as I shall want. But don't show me any Castles in Wales or Spain, and don't show me semi-detached villas in Hackney. Have you got the idea?"

"Certainly, madam. Just one moment." He consulted a number of small cards arranged in

alphabetical order. "I have a very nice place near Reigate. Dining-room, drawing-room, study, seven bedrooms, large garden——"

"What about the river?" demanded Jilly.

"Well, madam, there's no river quite near the house."

"How far away is it?"

The young man gazed at the ceiling.

"Let me see. I should say Surbiton or Kingston would be the nearest point—about twelve miles off."

Jilly drew a long, long breath and looked at Miss Dinwiddy. Then, keeping herself strangely and ominously calm, she leaned across the desk and spoke to the agent in a small, very distinct voice.

"Listen. Let me explain. I want a small, pretty, secluded, furnished house or cottage *close* to a river. *Close*. Not twelve miles off. Not—twelve—miles—off. Not even eight miles off. But *close*. I want it so close that I can dive into the river from my bedroom, if I think fit. And you can't do that if the river is twelve miles off, can you, my lad?"

The "lad" flushed, and bent once again over his cards.

"I have a nice place here—Holmlea, Teddington. Eight bedrooms, garage, tennis-lawn, poultry-run——"

"What about the river?"

The agent smiled in a rather superior way.

"Well, madam, I believe most people are aware that Teddington is on the river."

"I don't want any back-chat!" retorted Jilly. "I'm here, remember, to put money into your pocket—not to take it out. Teddington may be on the river, but I suppose there are houses at Teddington that are not close to the river. Eh?"

"Certainly, madam."

"Well, this poultry-farm you mentioned. Is it close to the river?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't tell you that, madam. If you'll leave your address——"

Jilly rose, and Miss Dinwiddy rose also. The house-agent seemed pained and surprised.

"The kindest thing I can wish you," said Jilly, in parting, "is that you may never be dependent upon your intelligence for earning a living. Because, if you were, you would have to use such brains as God has given you, and then your little head might ache rather badly. Good morning."

"Do you think," she asked Miss Dinwiddy, as they found themselves in the street, "that *all* house-agents are drivelling idiots who make it their chief business in life to keep the houses empty?"

"Yes, dear," agreed the doleful one, "nearly all."

But there are good house-agents as well as bad, and Jilly at last discovered the cottage of her dreams, which she promptly secured for the month

of August. Thither, in due course, she repaired with Miss Dinwiddy, and there they were joined by the stately Mrs. Houseboy, who was to be the chaperon.

The lawn ran down to the river, which was very shady and quiet. There was a landing-stage, and a boat, and an island just round the first bend, and a backwater, and water-lilies, and bulrushes. There were roses in the garden, and an arbour, and shady walks, and lots of old-fashioned flowers, and sweeps of smooth turf.

In the cottage there were ingle-nooks, and chintz curtains, and blue china, and window-seats looking over the river, and a quaint oak staircase, and a grand piano which Miss Dinwiddy declared excellent.

Jilly, from the very day of her arrival, was seized with a passion for bathing. She had never learnt to swim, and this was her opportunity. Miss Dinwiddy could both swim and dive, and Jilly was an apt pupil. She had any amount of pluck, and a week saw her quite confident in the water. At the end of a fortnight she could dive quite sufficiently well, but she excelled at trick-diving. She delighted to astonish Mrs. Houseboy by toppling into the river backwards, and even went so far as to do it with her clothes on. Miss Dinwiddy promptly went in after her, and both girls discovered that, if necessary, one could swim

in petticoats by keeping a level head and a long, easy stroke.

The third week of this idyllic life had just begun when Jilly, at breakfast one morning, made an announcement to Mrs. Houseboy.

"To-morrow," said Jilly, "we are going to have visitors."

"Indeed?" The *grande dame* was distinctly interested. Nothing could suit her better than to entertain a Theatrical Knight or a King of Commerce.

"Yes, some old friends of mine and Miss Dinwiddy's. One you know—Ed Chauncey."

"I should think I did! He helped us out of our troubles at Ilkhampton, if I remember rightly?"

"That's the chap. And the other's a Dr. Steele—a very nice man, isn't he, Nell?"

"I must cut some pink roses," replied Miss Dinwiddy, rising.

"Coals to Newcastle!" called Jilly after her. "Well, Mrs. Houseboy, these two are coming to lunch and will spend the day. They go back to town by the last train. I want them to have a nice time, so will you give the proper orders?"

"Certainly, my dear. Is——" The old lady lowered her voice, for Nell was visible through the open casement-windows—"Miss Dinwiddy particularly interested in Dr. Steele?"

"To-morrow will show," replied Jilly, in the same tone.

"And you, my dear? I like to be in the secrets. Is Mr. Chauncey coming down to declare himself at last?"

"Mrs. Houseboy," said Jilly, "hand me over those scissors. If you go on like this, there won't be a pink rose left in the garden."

"I only hope," persisted the old lady, "that everything will go swimmingly."

"That's funny!" replied Jilly. And she ran out, laughing, to join Miss Dinwiddy.

IV

Mention has been made of an island just round the first bend. On this island, the time being about four in the afternoon of a beautiful August day, Miss Dinwiddy and Dr. Ernest Steele were boiling a kettle, whilst Jilly Nipchin and Ed Chauncey spread a table-cloth for tea. There was a certain repressed excitement in Jilly's manner; she was annoyed to find that her hand trembled as she raised a corner of the white cloth. Worse still, Ed Chauncey noticed it.

"Been smoking too many cigarettes?" he asked.

"Not a single one since we came down here," replied Jilly. "Why?"

"Guess your hand's a bit shaky!"

"That's nervousness. I don't entertain such distinguished people every day of my life, you know."

"When did you start in being nervous, Jilly?"

"I dunno. It's been coming on a long time."

"Not nervous working, are you?"

"Not a scrap! But just before I go on—oh, help!"

"Good for you! As long as you keep that, your work will always be at concert-pitch. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"Did you come down here to talk about work, Ed Chauncey?"

"You bet I didn't!"

"Why did you come down?"

"I'd love to tell you!"

"Mind the jam! You nearly upset the whole lot into the sugar!"

"Must have had some sweet thoughts in me head!"

"That would be a novelty," replied Jilly.

Miss Dinwiddy and the panel-doctor, in the meantime, were making slow progress in their own particular way.

"Do you think it'll topple over?" asked the doctor, his eyes fixed anxiously on the kettle.

"Not likely," replied the gloomy lady.

"That's a pity," ventured the doctor.

"Yes, but it can't be helped." Miss Dinwiddy here struck the lowest note in her register.

"I thought we might leave it to look after itself, perhaps, and take a little stroll round the island?"

"Duty is duty," she reminded him mournfully.

"But I'm not on duty at the moment," he protested. "I'm——" And there he stopped short and fidgeted with the kettle.

"You were saying——?"

"I was going to point out that I'm having a little holiday."

"I hope it will do you good."

"Thank you, I expect it will. Charming spot here, is it not?"

Miss Dinwiddy sighed deeply—as well she might. Presently Jilly drew her aside and murmured low.

"Anything doing, Nell?"

"Nothing. We get to a certain point and there we stick."

"But he keeps looking at you in a very adoring way."

"I haven't noticed it."

"No, he doesn't do it when you could notice it—the duffer!"

"What about your man?"

"Oh, full of pleasant little jokes. I don't want jokes! I want to be swept off my feet like Juliet or one of those! So if you're ready, Nell, I am!"

"It's extremely mad, dear."

"Oh, we can't help that! It's all the fault of

the men. If we don't bring them up to the scratch to-day, it's my solemn belief we'll be old maids all our lives. Take out your hairpins."

"My hairpins, dear? Why should I?"

"It's a picturesque touch. I thought of it in the night. I'll do the same, don't you see, and then our beautiful raven and auburn tresses will float upon the water! So as they can't mistake which is which!"

"Very well, dear. Anything you like."

The tea was all prepared and the kettle nearly boiling when Jilly suddenly exclaimed:

"My goodness! This is a nice thing!"

"What?" cried the unsuspecting guests.

"We've forgotten the cake! I'll jump into the boat and go and get it!"

"Let me go!" pleaded Ed.

"No, you stay where you are. I won't be half a shake!"

"But why should you go alone?" asked the doctor. "You'll want somebody to steady the boat while you get out."

"That's true," agreed Jilly. "I'll take Nell."

Before the two men realised what was happening, Miss Dinwiddy and Jilly were in the boat. Jilly took the sculls, and Miss Dinwiddy the rudder-lines.

"Don't be long," urged Ed Chauncey, as he shoved the boat away from the bank.

"Why not?" asked Jilly, darting him a provocative glance.

"Maybe I'll tell you later," shouted Ed.

"And maybe you won't," muttered Jilly to the bottom of the boat, "unless I make you."

The girls rounded the bend. When they were out of sight of the island, but within hailing distance of it, Jilly deliberately shipped her sculls.

"Are you ready, Nell?"

"Yes, dear."

"No, you're not. Let your hair down."

The auburn and raven tresses fluttered in the breeze.

"I feel as if I were going to commit suicide," said the cheerful Nell.

"I don't. But it's rather thrilling, isn't it?"

"I'm anxious about you, dear. Are you sure you can float in your clothes?"

"You know I can. Done it heaps of times."

They stood up in the boat. For the last time, Jilly rehearsed the scene.

"One—two—three, and in I go! Splash! 'Help! Help! Help!' from you. Then splash! In you go! And the rest is up to the men! Good luck, old girl!"

"Good luck, Jilly!"

Miss Nipchin drew a deep breath, looked about to make sure they were quite unobserved, placed her hands above her head, and solemnly counted,

"One—two—three!" There was a splash, three screams for help, and a second splash!

V

Dr. Ernest Steele and Mr. Ed Chauncey seated themselves by the side of the tablecloth and exchanged cigarettes. They had not much in common, the staid panel-doctor and the light-hearted equilibrist. One wanted to talk about Miss Dinwiddy, the other about Jilly. But the diffidence that so annoyed Jilly did not desert them even when the girls were absent.

"Jolly little place," observed the doctor.

"You bet," replied Ed Chauncey.

"You been down here before?"

"Nope. You, doctor?"

"This is my first visit."

After this brilliant effort, they puffed at their cigarettes in silence.

Suddenly, through the still afternoon air, came a cry of "Help! Help! Help!" The two men sprang to their feet. The cries came from just round the bend, and both had recognised the deep voice of Miss Dinwiddy.

"This way!" shouted Ed, plunging through the trees and undergrowth of the little island. But the doctor had flung off his coat, and was already in the water. A fine swimmer, he reached the end

of the island just as Ed Chauncey leapt from the bank into the water.

"Help! Help! Help!" came the shouts again, and this time Jilly's tones mingled with those of Miss Dinwiddy.

"My God, they're both in!" muttered Ed Chauncey as he swam. "Coming!" he called. "Coming! Hold on!"

"Coming!" echoed the doctor.

"Here they come!" spluttered Jilly. "Float, Nell! Give the raven locks a chance!"

They rolled over and closed their eyes. The men, rounding the bend, saw the raven locks and the auburn tresses on the water. They quadrupled their efforts. A few seconds later, Jilly felt herself grasped by the hair and tugged towards the boat.

"Who—who is it?" she gasped.

"Me!" was the answer. "Ed! Keep still, my darling, and I'll save you!"

"*What?*"

"Keep still and I'll save you!"

There was no repetition of the tender word. Jilly was so furious that she let herself sink, and Mr. Chauncey, greatly terrified lest she had swooned, sank with her. Up they came again, and this time he dragged her to the boat and supported her there.

Miss Dinwiddy and the doctor had already reached the boat, and the doctor was climbing in.

Bidding them all hold tight, he seized the sculls and pulled the little party to the bank. Jilly allowed herself to be lifted from the water and laid upon the turf. The doctor was about to apply artificial respiration when her lips moved, very feebly.

They all bent over her.

"What is it? What is it, Jilly?"

She murmured something, but they could not catch it.

"You speak to her, Ed," suggested Miss Dinwiddy.

"Right! Jilly! Jilly, dear! Can you hear me? It's Ed! Can you hear me, darling?"

"You bet!" murmured Jilly, opening her grey eyes and looking into his.

VI

Dinner was over. Mrs. Houseboy, having taken up a strategic position on the veranda, dozed. Miss Dinwiddy, with the assistance of the doctor in evening-dress, was playing the piano. Jilly and Ed Chauncey, also in evening-dress, sat on a garden seat and ogled the moonlit river.

"If he doesn't do it now," thought Jilly, "I give it up!"

"If I'm ever going to do it at all," thought Ed, "now's the time."

And so it was. On such a night—warm, still, fragrant, melodious—a piece of granite might have made love to a clod of earth. Miss Dinwiddy presently began to sing in her low rich contralto.

"That's nice," said Ed, and sighed.

"Awfully," agreed Jilly, and sighed.

"Sure you don't feel cold?"

"Not a scrap."

Miss Dinwiddy sang on. They couldn't hear the words, but, through the open French window, they could just see the doctor tenderly turning the leaves of the music.

"I think something will happen in there before we're much older," said Mr. Chauncey.

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, I shouldn't think he could hold out for long."

"Hold out? Who? Why?"

"The doc, of course. He's dead nuts on Nell."

"What makes you think that?"

"You ought to have seen his face when she screamed 'Help!' this afternoon. And he was in the water quickest thing I ever saw."

"Before you?"

"Yes, he was in before me. I ran to the end of the island and took a header from there."

"Anyhow, you both arrived together, didn't you?"

"Yes, we swam neck and neck. The doc was putting in his best work, I can tell you."

"And weren't you?"

"I got along. And then he made straight for Nell."

"And so you had to be content with me!"

"I ketched a hold of you by the hair!"

"You needn't remind me of that. It still feels sore at the roots."

"You should have seen the tender way he helped her out of the water!"

"I suppose you bundled me on to the bank any old way!"

"I dunno about that. You soon came round when I spoke to you."

"Did you speak to me? What did you say?"

"Oh, just 'Jilly' and that."

"Not much to bring a person round!"

"And then the doc helped Nell into the house as if she was damp gingerbread. Never see a man so concerned."

"I had to walk in all alone."

"Here, chuck it! I helped you in just the same as he helped Nell."

"As if I was damp gingerbread?"

"I don't say that. What's Nell singing?"

"You'd better go and listen."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Please yourself."

"Bit huffy, ain't you?"

"No. Only jealous."

"Jealous? Who of?"

"Nell."

"Nell? Come off it, Jilly!"

"She's so tall."

"I like little girls."

"And such a lady!"

"Not more than you. I'm not going to have that."

"And she's so clever."

"Clever? Well, I like that. And you pretty near the top of the tree. I sometimes wish——"

"For the moon?"

"I got no use for the moon at present. And, if I had, she's too high up for me. I'm only a common acrobat."

"You don't say that on the bills, old sport."

"That's different. You have to swank on the bills."

"Shall I tell you my motter?"

"Out with it."

"'Live up to the printing.'"

"If I was to do that I should——"

"Yes?"

"Well, I mean if I was really world-famous, I should——"

"Yes?"

"Well, I might make a grab at the moon and chance me luck."

"Blow the moon!" retorted Jilly impatiently.
"Let's talk about me for a change."

"Same thing."

"Thanks for those few nuts, but I don't want any leg-pulling."

"I guess you know you're miles above me, Jilly."

"As I said to you once before to-day, did you come down here to talk about work?"

"Nope. But I can't get it out of me head that you're a star."

"I was the moon just now."

"Well, the stars are just as high. And I guess I'm only a kind o' kite."

The music had stopped.

"I guess you want a drink," said Jilly. "But come quiet so as not to disturb the others."

They crossed the lawn and came within a few yards of the open French window. Jilly promptly turned her back. But she did not move from the spot.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Ed.

"What are they doing?" whispered Jilly. She would not look herself, but an object-lesson might be useful for Ed.

"Just talking."

They waited in the shadow of the great cedar. The night was marvellously still. They could hear the river lapping the banks and Mrs. House-boy gently snoring on the veranda.

"And what now?"

"He's taken hold of her hand."

"What sort of a way?"

"Like this." And Ed took Jilly by the hand. Her back was still to the open French window.

"What's happening now?"

"He's putting his arm round her waist."

"What sort of a way?"

"Like this." Mr. Chauncey's arm went sliding round Jilly's waist.

"Anything more?"

"Nope. Just standin' like that. . . . Ah!"

"Well?"

"She's put her head on his shoulder."

"Like this?"

"Yes, only a bit cosier."

"That better?"

"That's fine!"

"Tell me when anything else happens."

"I'm watching out."

Jilly was watching the shadow cast by the cedar-tree against the moon. A few minutes more, and she reckoned it would leave them revealed. Oh, hurry up, you two inside!

"Well?"

"He's kinder bendin' over her."

"What sort of a way?"

"Very low and gentle—like this." Ed's breath played gently on her bare neck. The edge of the

shadow crept nearer and nearer as the moon rose higher.

"Well?"

"He's going to kiss her!"

"Never!"

"I'll bet he is! Buck up, doc!"

(Oh yes, doc! Buck up!)

"He's done it!"

"Done what?"

"Kissed her! He's still kissing her!"

"What—what sort of a way?" faltered Jilly.

"This sort of a way!"

The shadow of the cedar-tree had quite deserted them before Ed Chauncey finished his illustration. Mrs. Houseboy, suddenly awaking and seeing the picture they made, thought that she was still asleep and dreaming a beautiful scene in a drama.

CHAPTER VII

"Highbrows"

I

MR. CUTHBERT LAWN, General Manager of the Westbury Repertory, came stealing softly into the stalls of the ancient theatre in which he conducted his somewhat erratic operations. A rehearsal, as usual, was in progress, but Mr. Cuthbert Lawn did not conduct the rehearsals. That privilege was left to the producer. Mr. Cuthbert Lawn was thus at liberty to excogitate the marvellous schemes whereby the sturdy citizens of Westbury were mentally, if not financially, enriched.

Mr. Lawn, who liked to fancy himself an enigma, worked in spasms. These spasms had such an exhausting effect upon him that they left him prone upon a sofa, a little volume by Henley or Stevenson in his weary hand, and his lightest wish anticipated by a devoted and an unflagging wife. The members of the company, on such occasions, would be invited to spend their Sunday evenings in the literary atmosphere thus created

by Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, and were graciously permitted to prattle to each other to their hearts' content, now and again receiving the benign unction of a word from the Master, or a long, enigmatic look from his large dark eyes.

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, having recently recovered from one of these spasms, was about to have another. His large eyes burned with the fire of the repertory enthusiast on the track of a scoop. Having burned for some twenty minutes to no purpose, they at last rested on the tall form of Miss Eleanor Dinwiddy. Mr. Lawn composed his face into a set smile of irresistible quality, and bore down upon the unconscious Nell with the slow but sure movements of the managerial spider. Sinking into a stall beside her, much as the even more celebrated spider must have seated himself on Miss Muffet's tuffet, he extended an enigmatic finger and touched Miss Dinwiddy, ever so lightly, on the arm.

We all know what happened to Miss Muffet. But Miss Dinwiddy was made of sterner stuff. She gave a violent jump, it is true, but remained in her seat—hypnotised, no doubt, by the large eyes and the set smile.

"I want. To speak. To you." Thus Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, who enhanced the mysterious quality of his personality by talking in a series of slow jerks, and in so low a voice that his remarks, very often, were not heard at all. As

though to atone to himself for that, he frequently missed the remarks of other people. His receptivity, like his ideas, was spasmodic. Now he heard you and now he didn't. When he did, he heard you at once. When he didn't, you were met with the enigmatic smile and the steady gaze of the large, dark eyes. It was always a toss-up.

"Well, Mr. Lawn, here I am."

"And jolly. Nice. You look."

"Thank you. Is that all you wanted to say, because I'm due on the stage in a few minutes."

"Can't. They wait. While you talk. To your Manager. On Business?"

"I shouldn't dream of keeping the poor dears waiting. D'you realise that we've been at it since ten o'clock this morning, and we're all playing at night?"

"Half. A sec.," pleaded Mr. Lawn, making his face extremely serious. "I want. To speak. To you."

"So you said before. I can't miss my cue."

"That's. All right. Sit down. Will you?"

Miss Dinwiddy complied. After all, for the time being, this young man was her meal-ticket.

"Thanks. I say." He leaned very near to her ear. "You know. Jilly Nipchin. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"She's. A very. Great friend. Of yours. Isn't she?"

"Yes."

"I want. To do. Her. A good turn."

"That's exceedingly kind of you!"

"She's. Too good. For the halls."

"I quite agree."

"She. Ought to take. Her proper place. In the profession."

"Jilly's a genius."

"I know. I've seen her. Work."

"She'd be proud to know that."

"It rests. With you. To do her. A jolly. Good turn."

"Then you may be sure I shall do it."

"Yes. I know. Well. I've got. A jolly. Good play. With a part. She could make. Her name in."

"Her name is already made, Mr. Lawn."

"Not in. Straight work. If she. Created. A fine part. In the Westbury Repertory. It would be. A feather. In her cap."

"What sort of a part is it?"

"Cock. Ney."

"May I read the play?"

"Splendid. Part!"

"I said, may I read the play?"

Very slowly, very solemnly, he shook his head.

"All right," said Miss Dinwiddy. "But I can't ask Jilly to play a part she knows nothing whatever about."

"It's a jolly. Good. Part!"

"So you said. But opinions sometimes differ."

Jilly Nipchin is quite independent of you, bear in mind."

"Eh?"

"Oh, never mind. It's getting near my cue. Sorry I can't help you."

Secretly amused, she went on to the stage and remained there until the end of the rehearsal. As she came out of the stage-door, and was hurrying off to her rooms for tea and a short rest before the evening show, Mr. Cuthbert Lawn again sidled into view.

"Hullo! Going. Home?"

"Yes. Good-bye."

"Half. A sec. Don't be. In such. A jolly. Hurry. I'll. Walk along. With you."

"Sorry, but I'm going by tram."

"Then. I'll come. In the tram. With you."

Which he did. It was out of the question, of course, to talk in the tram, and it was too cold to talk in the street, so Miss Dinwiddy was compelled to ask him in.

"Jolly. Comfy. Rooms!" said Mr. Lawn.

"Will you have some tea?"

"No. Thanks. I must. Pop. Off. What about. Jilly Nipchin?"

"I can't say any more than I said this afternoon. Let me read the play, and, if I think the part suited to her, I'll write and ask her if she cares to come down and play it. She'll want a big figure, you know."

"How. Much?"

"Oh, fifty at the very least."

"Or. An interest. In the receipts?"

"Yes, her manager might agree to that."

"Who's her manager?" Strange to say, that all came out at once.

"I really forget," replied Miss Dinwiddy.

"Excuse me if I go on with my tea."

"Don't. You mind. Me. Jolly. Nice. Tea! My company. Do themselves. Jolly well!"

Miss Dinwiddy ate and drank in silence. Mr. Cuthbert Lawn prowled about the room, studying intently all the signed photographs, more especially the photographs of Jilly. At last, holding one of these in his hand, he said:

"I'd like. To do. Her. A good turn."

"Well, you know the first step," Miss Dinwiddy reminded him.

"She looks. A bit. Hipped."

"Does she?"

"Looks. As if. She'd had. A disappointment. In love."

He was fishing. Miss Dinwiddy was sure of it.

"I wonder," was all her answer.

"Didn't. You know?"

"Is there anything to know?"

"About. That. Acrobat chap. Chauncey. American acrobat."

"I know Mr. Chauncey quite well. He's an old friend of mine."

"Jolly. Clever chap! But they say. He jilted. Jilly Nipchin. And went. Off. To America."

"He did nothing of the kind! I won't hear it said! Ed Chauncey's one of the very best! He's in love with Jilly, and he could marry her to-morrow, but he's too proud to have it said that he's living on her earnings! Now you know the whole truth, and I wish there were more men like him either on the halls or in the theatres!"

"Jolly. Romantic. Affair!" agreed Mr. Lawn, who made no further reference to the new play, and soon afterwards stole down the stone staircase to the street. Glancing up at Miss Dinwiddy's window, he observed to himself:

"Think. Yourself. Jolly clever. Don't you? But when. People. Lose their tempers. They generally. Tell you. All you want. To know."

II

Jilly, in her dressing-room at the London Amphitheatre, was whiling away the time between the first and second house by playing bezique with little Dorothy Hollis, who had now become her permanent companion and secretary. Jilly was by no means at the head of her profession, but she was never in want of work, and frequently topped the bill at provincial halls. Besides run-

ning her small flat, and keeping herself and Dorothy both in London and on tour, she looked after her old people—who still lost a little money in the happiest way at the tiny shop in York Lane—and helped Horace—"Orris" no longer—when circumstances were too much for him.

Never very good at saving, she had, nevertheless, managed to put by some five or six hundred pounds. After all, she would ask herself, in doleful moods, why save? To what end? For whom? Horace and the old folks would be quite comfortable so long as she was working, and the chances were that she would work, on much the same plane, for many years to come. If she had made a home for—Oh, well, if men liked to be such fools, why bother about them? Why trouble your head about any man, J. Nipchin? A fig for the whole lot! Yes, equilibrists and all! And then she would sigh, and Dorothy would sigh, whereupon Jilly would laugh and kiss her little companion, and Dorothy would chuckle with contentment and adore her more than ever.

Came a tap at the door—the familiar tap of Blaker, the stage doorkeeper.

"Miss Nipchin?" called Blaker, in his high, cheerful, never-say-die voice.

"Come in, Blaker."

Blaker opened the door a little and thrust in his head.

"Can you see Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, miss?"

"Never heard of him, Blaker."

"No, miss? One of these here highbrows—manager of the Westbury Repertory. Bit hard of hearing, seemingly. I told him you never saw any one without appointment, but I couldn't seem to make him understand. Shall I tell him off?"

"Westbury Repertory? He may have some message from Nell! No, I'll see him, Blaker. What's the name again?"

"Lawn, miss. *Cuthbert* Lawn. Puts you in mind of George Robey, don't it?" And Blaker withdrew, laughing shrilly.

Jilly peeped at herself in the glass, tucked one or two garments behind a curtain—she never encouraged her dresser to hang about when she was once ready for the stage—and took up a dignified attitude by the dressing-table. Dorothy, rather shyly, opened the door to Mr. Lawn and then remained in the room.

Mr. Lawn came gliding in with all sails set. That is to say, his dress-coat was perfectly set, and his white tie was perfectly set, and his white waistcoat, and his hair, and his smile. His smile was the most set thing about him. You would have supposed that it never could and never did come off. As Jilly said afterwards, in describing the interview to Nell Dinwiddy, she almost thought this must be some very old friend whom she had forgotten through a blow on the head.

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn advanced, seized her by

the hand, and held it as though he would never, never let it go again as long as they both lived.

"Jolly. Glad. To meet you!" he breathed, beaming away like one o'clock.

"Thanks," said Jilly, recovering her hand with a slight tug. "Sit down, won't you?"

"Thanks! Saw. Your turn. First house. Topping!"

"Glad you liked it. Personally, I thought I was rotten."

"Topping! Simply. Topping!" And then he relapsed into silence, and just beamed, and beamed, and beamed. Little Dorothy Hollis was not quite sure whether the visitor was insane or the pleasantest gentleman in the world. Such delight seemed almost uncanny. She kept a watchful eye on the door.

"I think you know a friend of mine—Miss Dinwiddy?" suggested Jilly.

"Ra. *Ther!* In. My Company! Jolly. Fine. Actress! Topping. Good. Sort! Great. Pal. Of mine!"

Naturally, Jilly's heart warmed to Mr. Cuthbert Lawn. A manager who could appreciate Nell at her true worth must have brains.

"Will you take anything to drink?" she suggested.

"No. Thanks. I must. Pop. Off. Pretty soon. Got. A lot. Of important. Appointments."

Once again he relapsed into silence, and beamed, and beamed, and beamed. Could this, Jilly wondered, be just a friendly call? If so, how long would it last? She glanced at Dorothy. Dorothy seemed inclined to have a fit of the giggles.

"Is Miss Dinwiddy quite well?" she asked at last, in sheer desperation.

"Ra. *Ther!* Simply topping. Health! Nothing like. Westbury air. And plenty of. Work!"

"Yes, I think she enjoys her work."

"Ra. *Ther!*"

A third silence, and more beaming. Never was such a fellow to beam as Mr. Cuthbert Lawn! He beamed at Jilly, and beamed at Dorothy, and beamed at the grease-paints, and beamed at the ceiling. Finally, overcome with sheer delight in all these things, he slapped his leg and laughed aloud.

"What's the joke?" asked Jilly, reverting to her blunt manner.

Mr. Lawn shook his head very slowly, beamed, and said nothing.

"Well, I'm sure you'll excuse me," observed Jilly, suddenly holding out her hand. "I have to get ready for the second house."

Mr. Lawn, who was always ready to shake hands, shook hands now. But he showed no intention of moving. Despite his important appointments, time appeared to be no object. Jilly returned to her chair, and busied herself in front

of the glass. But she could not escape the beaming glance of Mr. Lawn, which met her in the mirror.

At last, unable to bear it any longer, she swerved round in her chair.

"Look here, young fellow, what is it? You're getting on my nerves! I shall scream in a minute! If you've anything to say, say it! If you haven't, please clear out and let me get ready for my turn!"

Mr. Lawn looked at his watch.

"All right," he assured her. "Plenty of Time. You're not on. For an hour. Yet."

"That's as may be," retorted Jilly. "But I can't have you sitting here all night, whoever you may be. So kindly state your business."

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, looking a little pained at this abrupt treatment, proceeded to state his business in his own way. He took a long time about it, but here was the proposition in a nutshell—Would Jilly come to Westbury in April and create the leading part—a good Cockney part—in a new three-act play by Austin Dawes? If the play succeeded, the Westbury Repertory people would probably arrange for a London run at a good West End theatre, and Jilly should have the refusal of the part on certain terms. For the week at Westbury he would pay her a nominal fee—as expenses, say—and give her the benefit of his advertising genius.

Jilly, as he saw at a glance, was tempted. She evidently regarded it as an honour to be invited to play a leading part at the Westbury Repertory. An unending round of music-hall work, combined with Ed Chauncey's unexpected departure for America after the scene in the garden by the river, was telling on her spirits. Nell, moreover, was at Westbury, and Nell knew all about everything. She could pour out her heart to Nell. She missed Nell. Dorothy was a dear little soul, but far too young for a confidante.

Yes, Mr. Cuthbert Lawn had acted astutely. He was already patting himself on the back. Jilly's name alone should fill the old theatre, and, if the play caught on, and satisfactory arrangements could be made for London, the Repertory purse would be replenished and his Directors would feel happier. So, having made his offer, he sat quite still and beamed and beamed and beamed.

"D'you want my answer right away?" said Jilly musingly.

Up went the hand. "Eh?"

"I said, d'you want my answer right away?"

"Yes. Please. I'm going. Back. To-morrow. And everything. Must be. In Train."

"What time to-morrow are you going back?"

"Very. Early."

"That's a pity."

"Why?"

"Because I must have to-night and to-morrow morning to think it over. I should have to arrange with my music-hall managers. How long would you want me to rehearse?"

"One. Week."

"Well, you see, that makes two weeks in all. I can't be sure till I look at my diary, but those two weeks are pretty sure to be filled in. I should have to exchange them. As for a run in London, I don't see a chance."

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, serious now, leaned forward. The time had come for the compelling force of personality to be employed. He fixed his large eyes on Jilly, and spoke with the utmost earnestness.

"There's no reason. Why your music-hall engagements. Should stand in the way. If you made a big hit in London. As you would. In this play. Your value would be doubled. Trust the music-hall people. To see that. They'd be quite willing. To postpone. By the way. I spoke to Miss Dinwiddy. About this engagement. She agreed with me. That you ought to seize the chance."

"Has Nell read the play?"

Up went the hand. "Eh?"

"Has Nell read the play?"

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn shook his head.

"Then how could she tell whether it was a chance for me or not?"

"We were speaking. Generally. She thinks. You're too good. For the halls. So do. I. Here's a fine chance. To get out of them!"

"May I read the play?"

"Haven't. Brought it. With me. Getting. The parts. Typed."

"Wouldn't Mr. Austin Dawes have a second copy?"

Mr. Lawn again shook his head. There was no particular reason, of course, why Jilly should not have read the play, but it was one of his convictions that actors and actresses seldom understood plays in manuscript. To a certain extent, perhaps, he was right.

"Well," announced Jilly, "I couldn't tell you offhand, Mr. Lawn, not if it was ever so. But I'll write you to-morrow or the next day."

"Too. Late."

"To-morrow, then."

"Too. Late."

"Well, how long can you give me?"

"I'll call. To-morrow. Morning."

"No, no! I shall be out!" Jilly felt unequal to the strain of another interview. The enigmatic manner and the beaming smile and the large eyes had already reduced her to a state of semi-collapse. "Will it do if I wire you?"

"Def. Inutely?"

"Of course."

"Very. Well. But. I shall. Never. Forgive you. If you don't. Come."

Another long hand-shake, a long look of intense sincerity, and he backed into the passage, beaming and beaming to the last.

Directly the door was closed, Jilly threw herself on to a small sofa and kicked violently for three minutes. Then she lay quite still and gazed at Dorothy.

"He reminds me of something," said Dorothy, "but I can't think what!"

"I know!" cried Jilly. "*A basilsilk!*"

III

Despite Nell's many reassurances, Jilly was very frightened of meeting the Westbury Repertory Company.

"I know you highbrows!" she declared to Nell on the evening of her arrival at Westbury. "You talk about Ibsen, and Plato, and anybody else who happens to be dead; and you live on apples and nuts; and you despise the halls! Fancy poor little me among that lot! I shall be sniffed out of existence at the first rehearsal! I don't care! I shall put on side! If they give me any back-chat, I'll tell 'em about my salary! I'll swank till I'm blue in the face! You see if I don't!"

Nell laughed.

"We're the most harmless lot of people in the world," she replied, "and we're all hard up, and we think chiefly of food, and money, and notices, and the chance of a job in London. As for a star like you, making your sixty pounds a week or something, we're all secretly in awe of you, though we may not show it, and we shall brag about having played with you until we're stars ourselves. So let us down lightly, Jilly. As you are great, be merciful!"

But Jilly's alarm did not subside until she found herself on the stage for the first rehearsal. They all seemed very familiar with each other, and rather tired, and quite unaffected, and extremely pessimistic about repertory in general and the Westbury Repertory in particular. Those who were playing long parts complained that they would never have time to learn half the lines, and a good deal of envy was bestowed on two or three members of the company who were not playing at all, and had come down to the theatre just for the fun of watching the others work.

The producer, Mr. Hallack, was quite unlike any stage-manager within Jilly's experience. His method was at first bewildering and then quite delightful. He was very quiet, very patient, but very firm. Instead of paying extravagant and blustering attention to the "big scenes" and the leading characters, it was the detail of the play that occupied him. He had no script of the piece;

not only did he know the play by heart, apparently, but he had somehow put on the very skin of the author. For the time being, he was the author. He felt with him, saw with him, almost created with him.

Jilly had studied her own part with very great care and deep interest, but Mr. Hallack, as the first act unfolded itself, let drop innumerable hints as to the character which surprised and thrilled her. She was not yet on the stage, but the picture was being composed for her. An atmosphere was being created for her. She confessed to herself, with shame and humility, that she had barely penetrated beneath the surface of the part. In her loyal little heart she swore the blindest allegiance to Mr. Hallack before the rehearsal had been going half an hour.

Here, for example, is a little incident that opened her eyes to the possibilities of play-producing. A middle-aged woman, Miss Plowright by name, came on and spoke some lines. The scene was laid in her drawing-room. Before she had been speaking many minutes, Mr. Hallack stopped her.

"Just a moment, Miss Plowright. I don't think you've quite got the idea of Lady Dinner."

Miss Plowright stiffened. It is always difficult for older players to adopt new methods, and she could not forget her little triumphs with certain old-fashioned slipshod managements.

"Is there anything so very subtle about her?" she demanded.

Mr. Hallack smiled.

"Oh, no, nothing particularly subtle, but I want you to convey to the audience a motherliness—a sort of 'been-through-the-mill' woman rather than the ordinary stiff-and-starched *grande dame*."

"But this woman is supposed to be a lady, is she not?"

"Well, the term 'lady' is rather a wide one, isn't it? I'll tell you exactly what I want and why I want it. You see, when Sarah comes on"—Sarah was Jilly's part—"Lady Dinner has to put up with a certain amount of cheek from her. Now, the ordinary stiff-and-starched lady of the conventional stage would never allow these impertinences from a maid; I mean, she wouldn't in real life, though she would in some London theatres. But we're after real life. Well, now, if you can manage to give Lady Dinner a certain tolerance—call it a sense of humour, if you like—you at once get the sort of woman who would be possible in this situation. Try those lines with a smile instead of set features, and an amiable amble rather than a stalk, and you'll see at once how it goes."

Miss Plowright shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well, Mr. Hallack. But all this is very different, of course, from the way I studied the part. And the time is so short——!"

"Yes, I know it is, but we shall get it right. I

want 'character' in the part, and that's precisely why I cast you for it. Now, once again, please."

Mollified by the skilful little compliment, Miss Plowright made her entrance again, but this time, instead of a stage-figure, she was a human being. The difference to the scene was extraordinary. The act assumed at once another tone. Mr. Hallack clapped his hands with delight, and Miss Plowright knew, by the smiling appreciation of her new reading on the faces of the company in general, that she was out for a success with Lady Dinner. There was no trouble with *her* after that.

"This is fine!" whispered Jilly to Nell Dinwiddy. "I never knew it was done like this!"

"Oh, that's nothing," replied Nell, who had thrown off much of her morbidity since her engagement to Dr. Steele. "You wait and watch. You'll see a thousand touches better than that."

At last came Jilly's own cue. She had never been so frightened in her life. Naturally, they would all expect great things. Her reputation would go pop! Here was quite another matter from entertaining a good-natured, uncritical, un-intellectual music-hall audience.

Mr. Hallack allowed her to read for a time without any interruption. Jilly, in fact, was on the point of begging him to tell her something when she heard his voice.

"One moment, please, Miss Nipchin!"

"Yes?" She ran to the floats—he was in the stalls—all eagerness.

"May I give you one little hint before we go any further?"

"Hint?" retorted Jilly. "Give me beans! Jump on me neck!"

There was general laughter, and she felt much better.

"No, I won't quite do that," replied Mr. Hallack, laughing himself, "but I just want to save time and trouble all round. You've nothing to learn about this part. I don't want you to approach it with the idea that this is a repertory theatre and a repertory play, and you must therefore do something 'different.' The part is quite straight and as clear as daylight. Just go at it easily, on your own lines, and the author will do the rest."

"Thanks awfully! Then can I just be a small-part kid and not a rotten star?"

Everybody laughed again, and Jilly's clouds rolled away like magic.

"It's hardly a small part," replied Mr. Hallack, "but we're all kids here, and we loathe, and detest, and envy all stars!"

The rehearsal then proceeded, and Jilly, having shed her self-consciousness, revealed the artist born in numberless ways that delighted the producer.

At two o'clock, Mr. Hallack gave the com-

pany half an hour for lunch. The men disappeared in a flash; two of the girls retired to their dressing-room with a paper-bag containing bananas and nuts; Jilly and Nell flew along to a little restaurant and ordered soup and fish.

"Well," asked Miss Dinwiddy, "and what do you think of repertory, Jilly?"

"Think of it? I think I shall marry Mr. Hallack!"

"That's all right, if you don't mind his having one wife already!"

"Drat the woman! I might have guessed it! Are you particularly fond of your panel-doctor, Nell?"

For answer, Miss Dinwiddy imprinted a surreptitious but none the less fervent kiss on her engagement-ring.

"There you go, you see!" retorted Jilly. "Whichever way I turn, blind alley! Isn't there any man in the company would suit me? What about that tall chap with the red hair?"

"Smallbone? Confirmed bachelor. Woman-hater."

"Well, I'm getting to be a bit of a man-hater, so we ought to hit it off rather well!"

"I'm so angry with Ed Chauncey, I could——!"

"Angry with him? Why? He did the right thing. Oh, no, not from his point of view—that's silly guff—but from mine. That was a low-down trick, that river business. It was all my idea, and

now I'm rightly and properly in the cart for it!"

"It was rather a shame. I had to confess."

"Who to? Your doctor?"

"Yes. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit! What did he say? It was plucky of you, Nell!"

"Roared with laughter, and then behaved absurdly."

"He didn't think it was too beastly mean for words?"

"Oh, no. Said he had to thank you for—well, I can't very well go on without swanking."

"I know . . . Nell?"

"Yes, dear?"

"D'you think if I lost all my money—what there is of it—and took to repertory work for good and all, Ed would think me poor enough for him?"

"I can't say what he'd think, but you certainly would be."

"Then I believe I will!"

"But what about your contracts?"

"Oh, dash those! I quite forgot 'em!"

"My dear," said Nell Dinwiddy, laying her hand affectionately on Jilly's arm, "you mustn't dream of doing anything so mad. You're too—what shall I say?—individual for repertory. You've struck out a splendid line, and you must stick to it. But I don't say that you need stick to the halls all your life. If you get a chance

of a good part in a good West End production, you take it. This play, for instance, will be done in London if it succeeds here, and you have the first call on the part. And then there's America. I should think they'd eat you in America."

"America?" mused Jilly.

"Yes—America."

"That's the land of hope and glory, ain't it?"

"For English mummers—yes."

"My word, Nell, if I had half the cheek I used to have when we first met——!"

"What would you do?"

"What would I do? I dunno. You can't go on chasing a man all yer life."

"Oh. . . . Won't Ed ever come back to England?"

"I dunno. He's a determined little devil."

"And you're not, I suppose?"

"I've given him one chance."

"Didn't I once read you a lecture about the girl having to make the opportunities?"

Jilly ate her fish in silence. As they walked back to the theatre, she suddenly clutched Nell Dinwiddy by the arm.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed. "I've got it all mapped out in me head! We must make a big go of this piece, so as to get it put up in London. Then we must make a big go of it in London—you'll have to play your same part—so as to get it taken to America. And then, once again

on the same continent with Master Ed, if I don't rub his nose in it my name isn't Jilly Nipchin, and you can call me a wash-out!"

"Splendid!" cried Nell. "So it all depends on Monday night!"

"You bet it does! Skip in, old girl, and we'll show Westbury a thing or two between us!"

From that moment onwards, she set her teeth in the part, worked like a little steam-engine, and fired the company with her enthusiasm. Mr. Hallack was overjoyed with his team, and Austin Dawes, arriving from London on the Friday before production, had little to do but sit in the stalls and chuckle.

"Mark my words," said Miss Plowright to Mr. Hallack, "if this piece goes like this in rehearsal, it'll be a dead failure at night!"

Mr. Hallack smiled to himself and made no reply. Though it is rarely necessary in repertory, the company seldom having time to get stale, there is such a thing, he knew well, as queering a too smooth dress-rehearsal, just to screw everybody, stage-manager and stage-hands included, up to concert pitch.

IV

The dress-rehearsal was over at last, and the company dismissed to get such rest and refreshment as they could before the first performance.

Everything had gone wrong. A flat had fallen down and almost killed Mr. Smallbone; luckily, it missed him altogether. Jilly had dried up three times. Miss Plowright had dried up twice. Nell Dinwiddy had kept the stage waiting nearly a minute by Mr. Hallack's watch. Miss Kewley, one of the nut-and-banana girls, had wept bitter tears because Mr. Hallack had chided her, and Miss Ruggles, her friend, had cried in sympathy. Both had resolved to leave the stage at the end of the season, and devote the remainder of their shattered lives to furthering the scheme for the Downfall of Man. Mr. Brothers, the stage-manager, had called his assistant, Mr. Rew, a chromatic fool, and Mr. Rew, thanking God he was a gentleman, had turned on his heel and walked rapidly to the stage-door—and back.

All this happened on the Monday morning and the early part of Monday afternoon. Mr. Austin Dawes, on leaving the theatre, asked a native to direct him to the river. On learning that it was forty minutes' ride by tram, he had reluctantly changed his mind, and sought relief in a hair cut, shave, shampoo, and electric massage.

When the doors opened, two women strolled listlessly into the pit, and four into the gallery. All had orders—the reward of virtuously displaying small bills in their windows. One brought a baby, which cried until the orchestra began to

play, and then had a mild fit and was taken home.

The curtain went up to a house that held eighteen pounds, four shillings, and threepence. The final return, thanks to a slightly inebriated gentleman, who mistook the theatre for a music-hall, was a shilling more. Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, beautifully dressed, sat in his office and dictated enthusiastic letters—on another subject—to London. At the fall of each curtain, he had a look at the calls and smiled enigmatically at any constant patron whom he encountered in the passages.

Mr. Hallack, biting his nails to the quick at the back of the dress-circle—a thing he did on the first night of each of his productions and never at any other time—knew that the play was a success five minutes after Jilly entered. When she came on, he could see that she was almost too nervous to draw her breath. Every nerve in her body was quivering. She was like a little sack full of live wires. She had enough magnetism to fill St. Paul's Cathedral. He was not the only one to get it. The people got it. Fat drowsy men, who had come in for nothing, sat up and became active receiving-stations. As the Psalmist puts it, she "tried all their reins." During the intervals, they staggered into the bar, wiping their eyes, and looking for somebody to whom they could say, "By God, sir!"

For such a small audience, the noise at the fin-

ish was extraordinary. Mr. Cuthbert Lawn hurried round to the stage through the pass-door and made a speech. He said:

"Ladies. And Gentlemen. This. Has been. A night to. Remember. It has. Been. A very great. Pleasure. To me. To introduce. Such a charming. Play. To a Westbury. Audience. From the bottom. Of my heart. I thank you. Again and. Again. Good. Night."

But they didn't budge. Not they. Austin Dawes went on, and was cheered, and retired, and went on again, and was cheered, and laughed, and bowed, and finally retired laughing and bowing to such an extent that he backed into the unfortunate Mr. Rew and trod rather heavily on that sensitive young gentleman's toe.

Still they called, and so Jilly went on. You should have heard the two women in the pit and the three women in the gallery who had come in with orders! They screamed at her, and shouted "Brayvo, ducky!" and waved their handkerchiefs, and secretly resolved to stick the bills in the very middle of their windows with gelatines. And you should have heard the fat men who had also come in for nothing! They clapped, and shouted, and waved their hats, and made allusions to Bancroft, and Kendal, and Terry, and added a fervent "By God, sir!" to each name!

Mr. Hallack took a call, and nobody had the least idea who he was, but they cheered all the

same. And then Mr. Cuthbert Lawn, with the most terrific beam within the memory of living playgoer, led on Jilly, and wrung her by the hand, and remained fixing the audience with his smile so long that the curtain came down and nearly finished off a promising career then and there!

Never was such a night! But it wasn't over yet, for there was a supper party at the principal hotel given by a Mr. Pollard, who took a passionate interest in repertory and flashlight photographs. The supper consisted of seven courses, and Mr. Pollard took a flashlight photograph of the whole company after each course. This delayed matters somewhat, but nobody cared twopence about the time—except the waiters—and Mr. Rew made a speech in which he assured the company, with tears in his eyes, that no man living could wish to work under a finer, nobler, splendor, and altogether jolly decent chap as—he meant than—Mr. Brothers.

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn was not present, the exertions of the evening having proved so fatiguing, but Mr. Austin Dawes made a speech, in the midst of which he was flashlighted. Then Jilly made a speech, to the accompaniment of the *wumph* of the apparatus, and Jilly and Mr. Dawes were *wumphed* together, and the whole company were *wumphed* in a friendly bunch. Last of all, by an ingenious arrangement which included a piece of string and a bootlace borrowed from the

head-waiter, Mr. Pollard managed to *wumph* himself, with Jilly on his right, Nell Dinwiddy on his left, Austin Dawes at the back, Miss Kewley and Miss Ruggles—who had supped exclusively off the fruit—tenderly wound together on the left, and Mr. Brothers and Mr. Rew, right hands clasped, gazing steadily and manfully into each other's eyes, on the right.

A motor-waggonette now arrived to convey the various members of the party to their respective homes, for Mr. Pollard did things well and with a becoming reverence for Art. Much hand-shaking and even a little kissing ensued, in the midst of which Mr. Rew suddenly remembered that Austin Dawes had stepped on his toe after taking a second call, and challenged that person to instant combat in the hall of the hotel. Mr. Dawes accepting the challenge, a space was cleared, and Mr. Pollard, with great expedition, set up his flashlight apparatus; but the ladies of the party, emerging from the cloak-room in the nick of time, forbade the combat and bundled Mr. Rew into the waggonette. All the others followed, the door was slammed, three cheers were given for Mr. Pollard, and away they went, followed by the execrations of the stupid visitors to the hotel, who could not understand that the discovery of a new and successful dramatist was of such importance that they might well have been burnt in their beds to celebrate the event.

V

On approaching the theatre the following evening, having gloated over enthusiastic notices in all the local papers and even some London ones, Jilly and Nell Dinwiddy beheld an unexpected sight. Round the corner from the little lane which contained the entrances to the pit and gallery, and far up the broad street which they were descending, stretched a line of waiting females, standing two by two.

"What's doing?" asked Jilly. "Is that the way to the soup-kitchen?"

"My child," replied Miss Dinwiddy, in an awe-struck voice, "that's a queue!"

"Not for us?"

"Yes—for us! We're a success, Jilly!"

"You're sure there isn't some mistake? You're sure there's no soup-kitchen or free packets of tea?"

"Quite sure. I've seen a queue like that before, but never so quickly after such a poor Monday night. Besides, the play has hardly been advertised at all. My word, won't they all be bucked!"

And, sure enough, bucked they all were, for a provisional notice to end the season the following week had been stuck up at the stage-door the

day before, and now, lo and behold, that notice had disappeared!

Before the curtain rose, the pit was nearly full and the gallery quite full. The other parts were fairly good, but there was room for improvement. The Wednesday *matinée* beat the Tuesday night, Wednesday evening was better than the *matinée*, and so things progressed until the Saturday night, when Westbury witnessed the somewhat unusual sight of a long queue of well-dressed people impatiently jostling each other in their eagerness to book seats for the boxes, stalls, and dress-circle.

"Why not run it another week?" suggested Austin Dawes to Mr. Cuthbert Lawn.

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Other. Arrangements. Made."

"Couldn't they be postponed? You see, the people are only just getting to know about the play."

Mr. Lawn shook his head, sorrowfully but determinedly.

"Im. Possible."

"Well, what about London?"

"Nothing. Doing. At present."

"Any one been up to see it?"

"No."

"How's that? Don't they want plays?"

"Yes."

"Then I should have thought it might be worth

their while to come as far as Westbury to see an admitted success! After all, here's the play being done for them before an actual audience! What more can they want?"

Mr. Cuthbert Lawn rolled his head slowly from side to side, and smiled the famous enigmatic smile.

"They won't. Budge."

"But why on earth not? Where's the sense of it? Are they afraid of railway accidents? Haven't they got the fare? What's the sense of it?"

"Ask me. Another."

And, with that, Mr. Dawes was supposed to be content. But he was not content. His play was a success, and he saw no reason why it should be snuffed out of existence after one week's trial at Westbury. After the curtain had finally fallen, therefore, and the calls and cheers had been repeated with the greater volume of a packed house, he waylaid Jilly, and extracted a promise that she and Miss Dinwiddy would sup with him at his hotel.

"Well," asked Jilly, when hunger had been appeased, "what's the news, Mister Author?"

"I'm afraid there's no news, Miss Nipchin."

"*What?* You don't mean to tell me this piece hasn't been snapped up for town?"

"So far as I know, not even a nibble."

"But do they know about it?"

"Oh, yes, they must know about it. There were notices in some of the London papers, and I wired to four or five managers myself."

"Then what is it? What more do they want? We started with sixpence in the house, and finished up with every seat sold. If that isn't proving the pudding by eating it, what is?"

"I don't know. It beats me. I had a talk to Cuthbert Lawn about it this evening."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, he didn't say much, but he looked a lot. He doesn't seem at all surprised that the London managers haven't been up."

Jilly was baffled, for her experience in this branch of the profession was limited. But being baffled did not prevent her from being indignant. If the London managers wouldn't come as far as Westbury to see a successful play, then she had been wasting her time and energies and money. So she said precisely what she thought about them, which did no particular harm to anybody and certainly relieved her feelings a little.

"Would you mind telling me," she asked, presently, "who this play belongs to?" (Business is business, and grammar be hanged!)

"It belongs to me," replied the author.

"But haven't these people here got a noption?"

"Yes, for one month after production."

"And then, if they don't take it up, the play is yours to do what you like with?"

"Precisely."

"Well, Mr. Dawes, I'm interested in this play for more than one reason. I think it's a mighty good play, and I like the part, and I should like to play the part in town. And there's other reasons. If the folks here don't take up their noption, will you give me the next cut at it?"

"With the greatest pleasure."

"On the usual terms, mind!"

"Oh, well, we can talk about that——"

"Cut it out, old sport! You don't write plays for your health, any more than I act for mine. I don't know how long it takes to write a play, but I know they can't be done in next to no time at all—not if they're to be any good. If it suits me to get a noption on your play, I ought to pay for that noption, and pay I shall, so you can take it or leave it. Let's see. Where are we now? April. Right. You wouldn't object to a summer season, I suppose?"

Mr. Austin Dawes explained that he was not in a position to quarrel with any season, summer or winter.

"Right," said Jilly. "Now we know where we stand. I'd fixed meself a bit of a holiday for the summer, but I don't know that it wouldn't suit me better to be doing a change of work. So you

come to me in a month's time, young fellow, and let me know the time of day. Is it a deal?"

They shook hands on it. Nobody needed a better contract than that when they were dealing with Jilly.

CHAPTER VIII

"TOP-NOTCHERS"

I

ON a certain afternoon in May of the same year, the porter of the Hotel Exquisite, London, W., sunned himself on the front steps, and regarded the streams of humanity passing to and fro beneath him with a tolerant and almost kindly eye. Every now and again he was compelled to descend the steps and open the door of a brougham or a landaulette. It would be absurd to suggest that he liked this task, but, being a man of sterling stuff, he did it without audible complaint. He had a shrewd memory for faces, and he made a mental note of the people thus assisted, with an appropriate item against each name. He had his own tariff.

Presently, however, the porter of the Hotel Exquisite uttered an exclamation that sounded shocked and angry. A *taxi-cab*—and a shabby, well-worn taxi-cab at that—had had the impertinence to pull up in front of his sacred steps! Some mistake, surely! The porter did not budge an inch.

A small hand, neatly gloved, came through the window and began to battle with the handle of the door. Seeing this, the porter condescended to saunter down the steps and assist the gloved hand. Whereupon the small owner jumped out and stood looking up at this splendidly terrifying individual. The porter, in his turn, stared down.

"How do!" said Jilly.

The porter inclined his head a sixteenth of an inch.

"I've come for the washing," continued Jilly.

The driver of the taxi-cab laughed, and the porter grew rather pink.

"Is this the backdoor or the front?" persisted Jilly.

"This is the Front Entrance of the Hotel Exquisite," replied the porter.

"Ho! May I venchar to enquiar whethar you know Sir William Mylchreest?"

"I have that pleasure."

"Ho! Well, unless you wish to keep him all to yourself, my buck, just stand aside and then p'r'aps I might get to know him, too."

She paid the cabman, who touched his hat after looking at the coin. This impressed the porter, who followed Jilly up the broad steps with a more agile gait. Taking no further notice of him, Jilly marched into the hall and up to the desk.

"Sir William Mylchreest, madam?" The clerk

looked a little doubtful. "Have you an appointment?"

"Oh, dear, no!" retorted Jilly, who had deliberately worked herself into an aggressive frame of mind as an antidote to a bad attack of nerves. "I'm quite in the habit of dropping in on titled gents just to pass the time of day!"

"I'm very sorry, madam, but we have to exercise great care. So many undesirable people are constantly endeavouring to secure an interview with Sir William. If you will kindly give me your card, and take a seat, I will let Sir William know that you are here."

"Very nicely said," commented Jilly. "Go up top. But I don't go in for cards. Jilly Nipchin is my name."

The clerk was quite unimpressed. Taking a slip of paper, he proceeded to write down the name.

"Dipchin, madam?"

"No, young man. Not Dipchin. Nipchin. N-I-P, Nip; C-H-I-N, Chin: Nipchin. If you look on the wall behind you, you'll see it in nice big print for young readers."

But the clerk would not look on the wall behind him. He beckoned to a page-boy, handed him the slip of paper, and told him to take it to Sir William Mylchreest, who was in the Winter Garden.

Jilly stared about her. She was nicely dressed in white, but nothing could disguise the smallness

of her stature or the quaint whimsicality of her pretty, clever little face. She had nothing whatever in common with the large, rustling, severe-looking women who, without cessation, passed in and out of the hotel.

The page-boy returned.

"Sir William Mylchreest's compliments, miss, and will you kindly step into the Winter Garden?"

Jilly followed him down a long softly-carpeted passage. It was deliciously cool in the hotel, and wonderfully quiet. Not a sound to jar on the nerves. Nothing but the occasional click of a lift and a murmur of well-bred voices.

The page-boy threw open a glass door, and Jilly caught a glimpse of numerous women in splendid gowns and amazing hats. They were all talking, and smiling, and waving their feathers, and sipping tea out of tiny cups. An appalling sight!

"Is Sir William alone?" she whispered to the page-boy, suddenly overcome with terror.

"No, miss; Sir William and Lady Mylchreest are holding a reception."

"Good God!" said Jilly.

But she was in for it now, for several of the huge women had begun to stare at this curious little object, and somebody was twitching at Sir William's sleeve. So far as Jilly could see, he was the only man present.

He turned, and the familiar features—familiar

through a thousand photographs as well as across the footlights—relaxed into the famous smile that has agitated such numberless feminine hearts the world over, and brought the great comedian a huge fortune and the honour of knighthood. The voice of an actor, the figure of an actor, the genius of an actor—these things compel admiration; but it is the smile that wins hearts, and the actor who cannot smile his way into the hearts of the public never reaches the heights attained by Sir William Mylchreest.

He came towards her, his hand outstretched with all the charm of manner that had been his for so many years. Even Jilly could see at a glance that he was perfectly at home among all these women. To note him threading his way through them gave her exactly the same impression as sitting in the stalls or pit of the Bodega Theatre.

"How do you do?" he growled musically. "Let me find you a chair in a quiet corner. We'll escape as soon as we can and go up to my room. Ah! Here's my dear friend Julie Mummery! Julie, dear, I want you to look after Miss—er—Miss—er—Dear me! Dear me!" He snapped his fingers with vexation at having allowed the name to escape him, and ruffled his silvery hair with the other hand.

"Why," said Miss Mummery, in her jolly,

heartily, unaffected way, "it's Jilly Nipchin, isn't it?"

"Of course!" said Sir William, with a gasp of relief. "Of course! Miss Hipchin! How stupid of me!"

Miss Mummery, who was a privileged friend of Sir William and Lady Mylchreest, and generally appeared in their productions, shook Jilly by the hand and smiled at her in the most reassuring manner.

"I've seen your work, my dear, and I should have known you anywhere! Come and sit down! Send a cup of tea, Sir William, like a good soul! Well, Miss Nipchin, and have you been to the garden-party?"

"Garden-party?" replied Jilly. "No, I haven't been to no garden-party. Is there one on?"

"Oh, yes, the Royal Garden-Party, you know! We've all been. I thought perhaps you'd come on from there. Surely you had an invitation?"

"Oh, yes," said Jilly, "but it would have meant washing me hair, so I cried off, see?"

"Quite so," assented Miss Mummery, a little chilled. "You know Sir William and Lady Mylchreest well, perhaps?"

"Backwards," said Jilly simply.

"Dolly's looking very sweet, don't you think?"

"Dolly who?"

"I mean Lady Mylchreest. We always call her Dolly."

"Oh. Well, up ter now, I haven't seen her. I s'pose all these are top-notchers, eh?"

Miss Mummery smiled indulgently.

"Well, I daresay they would be called something like that by the man in the street. That tall woman in the mulberry silk is the Countess of Dodding, and the girl she's talking to is the Hon. Evelyn Lapper, who is engaged to Lord Bowes. We're all so pleased about it!"

"And me," said Jilly. "I'm 'arf off me dot with delight."

"You know Evie?"

"Well, who doesn't?"

"Exactly. She goes everywhere. And where are you playing just now, Miss Nipchin? I think I saw you last at the London Amphitheatre."

"Yes, I was there for a bit, but I think of giving up the halls."

"Really?" Miss Mummery's eyes opened very wide. "That will mean a great loss, won't it?"

"For the halls? Yes, I'm afraid it will. But I've been playing with the Westbury Repertory lately, and I find that kind of work very agreeable."

"But very exacting, surely?"

"Well, they make you sweat a bit. But who minds that? Have you ever played in repertory, Miss Mummery?"

"Er—no, I can't say I have. One is always so occupied in the West End. Er—excuse me a

moment! I just want to say a word to the Duchess before she goes!"

Jilly, left to herself in the corner of the Winter Garden, looked round upon the leaders of London Society with an amused twinkle in her merry grey eyes.

"Well, my dear," she said to herself, "you appear to be getting on! All you want is more push. Swank, my girl; that's the ticket! You floored the lady about the repertory racket, and there's no reason why you shouldn't floor the lot! Be at home, be easy, and the trick's done. Waiter!"

An individual with powdered hair bent over her obsequiously.

"I don't like this tea, my lad. It's a bit stewed. Just pitch it away, and bring me a nice cool whisky and soda. Sharp's the word!"

"Very good, miss." And the waiter glided off like a figure on silent castors.

"There you are!" continued Jilly to herself. "Easy as easy! But I do wish Ed Chauncey could see me now, ter say nothing of mother, and dad, and Orris! 'Ulllo! 'Ere comes Sir William-All-Smiles! You've got to go through it, my lad, and there's no two ways about it!"

II

"A thousand apologies!" exclaimed the great actor. "Lady Mylchreest insisted on my showing up! Lord, how I hate all these functions!"

"Poor old thing!" replied Jilly, in a motherly tone. "Why don't you sit down and join me in a glass of something cool?"

Sir William smiled.

"You're taking care of yourself, then? That's right."

"You bet I am. And I should advise you to do the same, Sir William. This social racket's all very well for those that like it, but it takes it out of you for night. Stands to reason."

The actor-manager nodded. He had but the vaguest idea what she was talking about. He was studying her as a type, and especially as a type for the central part of the play submitted to him by Mr. Austin Dawes.

They made a quaint couple, sitting together in the corner of the Winter Garden. The great ladies smiled as they glanced in that direction. Jilly noticed the smiles. They hurt, but she would not wince. Undoubtedly, she was getting on.

The great ladies were all gone at last, and Sir William led the way to the lift. His suite of rooms was on the top floor, commanding a glorious and expansive view of the Park. Jilly gasped.

She had never even dreamed of the existence of such rooms. Fancy living there all the year round, except when you chose to go elsewhere! Fancy having all those hotel servants, as well as your own servants, to run about for you and wait on you from morning till night! Fancy having everything you wanted, always, till you died! *Everything*—food, clothes, luxurious travel, homage, flowers, wines, sunshine, excitement, and the power of giving pleasure to others!

It seemed almost too much. She studied Sir William Mylchreest, much as he had studied her. How did he stand it? Was he radiantly happy, or did he, secretly, agree with her that it was too much? He was sitting at a table, pince-nez on nose, poring over the manuscript of the play. His brow was wrinkled in thought, and his silvery hair more rumpled than ever.

"Now, tell me, Miss—er—Miss—er—! Dear me! Dear me!" And he snapped his fingers.

"Nipchin," said Jilly. "N-I-P, Nip; C-H-I-N, chin. Nipchin. Funny name, ain't it?"

"Forgive me, Miss Pipchin. You played in this piece somewhere in the provinces, I believe?"

"That's right. Westbury. And I tell you, Sir William, we fairly bit 'em in the neck!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say we fairly bit 'em in the neck. You know—got 'em down and jumped on 'em! It was a cinch, as my pal Ed Chauncey used to say. Sure

thing. Lead pipe. Rock-bottom. Took 'em sitting. See what I mean?"

"I have seen the nightly returns. They are quite encouraging. But Westbury is not London, Miss—er—Miss—er—. No. Westbury is not London. The London audience is the most pampered audience in the world. One must be very careful not to jar on their sensibilities. I have been in London management for many years, and that is the greatest lesson I have learnt—that the London audience is a pampered audience, and must be studied very carefully."

"Wot, pampered some more?"

"Exactly."

"Why not give it them a bit straight for once?"

"Ah, there you show your inexperience, Miss—er—. One cannot afford to play tricks of that kind with the London public. Management is too costly. One false step and a fortune is lost." He began to stride up and down the room, running his hand through his hair. "People talk to me about my luck. Luck? Any success that I have had in my career, Miss Chin, is due to the fact that I always acted at once on my judgment, and always studied the pampered West End public. I have met storms, and weathered them. I have had hostile critics, and silenced them. I have had obstinate authors, and overcome them. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, fighting, fighting, fighting! Always

fighting! Sometimes losing, sometimes winning, but always fighting! And then they talk to me of luck! I may have had luck, Miss Chin, but I attribute my success to the fact that I studied the public and never outraged their sensibilities!"

"I see," said Jilly, feeling, despite her resolution, very small.

"Now, then, Miss Chin. About this play. The author tells me you wish to put it on in London and play your original part?"

"Well, I don't quite know about putting it on. I'm afraid I couldn't afford to do that."

"What could you afford? I mean, how much are you prepared to stake over this venture if I decide to give it a chance?"

"That all depends, don't it?"

"I don't understand you."

"I suppose it all depends how much was wanted. I'm new to all this, you see. Mr. Austin Dawes told me you'd read the play, and liked it, and might put it on at the Bodega if somebody was prepared to stand in over it. But he didn't say how much they would have to find."

"Ah! Could you find a thousand pounds?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Jilly. She was quite humble now. This magnificent person of great experience, and this palatial apartment, had swept all her little bundle of swank into the air.

"Five hundred?"

"Yes, I could manage five hundred."

"You're prepared to lose that amount?"

"Y-es, if necessary. But I'd rather not."

"That won't do, Miss Jaw. If we're going to be partners in this little venture, I want to feel that you're doing something you want to do, that it is worth your while to do, and that you can afford. You must be prepared to lose any sum that you put up. If I lend my theatre, and my staff, back and front, and my orchestra, and my scenery, I shall take, in return for all that, half the gross receipts."

"Oh, certainly," said Jilly.

"Those are the usual sharing terms. Now comes the question of the money to produce and run the play. The scenery, I think, we have in stock. The company must find their own dresses. If I add five hundred pounds to your five hundred, we ought to be able to give the play a decent trial. And we divide any profits. That is to say, on one side, I am the manager; on the other side, I am half the visiting company and you are the other half. Is that all clear?"

"Clear as daylight," said Jilly.

"Very well. I will go into the matter with my manager, and he will let you have my decision. What about the cast? Were any of those young people in the provinces any good?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Jilly, with enthusiasm. "They were splendid! We bught to have them

all! They're finishing there this week, so there'd be no difficulty!"

"I don't know about having them all, but we might make use of some. Who rehearsed the play?"

"Mr. Hallack. Oh, you must have him! He was wonderful! It couldn't help being a success if we had Mr. Hallack!"

The great actor paused, folded his arms, and fixed Jilly with a look that went right through her small frame and came out on the other side.

"'Couldn't help being a success,' Miss Bone? *Never* say that! Let me advise you *never* to say that of any play! I have had a long experience—an experience stretching over decades before you were born! I have seen changes—strange changes in London theatrical life! And I tell you for your benefit that *I* never know—not even to this day—when a play is going to succeed and when a play is going to fail! I have made fortunes out of plays that nobody believed in but myself! On the other hand, I have produced plays by the best living authors, I have cast them with the best obtainable actors and actresses, I have lavished money on the dresses and the scenery—all to no purpose! The one thing, Miss Bone, that we never know in this profession is whether we are working for success or working for failure! So don't build your hopes on any author, or any theatre, or any cast, or any pro-

ducer! That is my earnest and most solemn advice!"

Crushed? Jilly was a mere speck of dust in the corner of the fender! She was invisible! Sir William Mylchreest, a thousand miles high, was stalking over the place where she had been! Swank? Oh, my poor little Jilly! How could you expect to hold your own with the accumulated wisdom of so many years! In your humility, my child, pray for a friendly puff of wind to remove you from the fender and whisk you into the lift!

"I see," was all she said, in the meekest, stillest little voice,

"Good." Sir William, having delivered his tremendous broadside, proceeded briskly to practical matters once again. "I suppose this gentleman you mention can see me at any time?"

"I'm sure he'd be only too pleased."

"And there are some others, I gather?"

"Oh, yes, I think so." Note the change of tone in Jilly. "There's my friend, Miss Dinwiddy—such a clever actress! She made a great success at Westbury! If ever a girl ought to be acting in London, she ought! She's a lady—not like me. Oh, do let's have Nell in it!"

"I will see her with pleasure. My manager will arrange the interviews, if you will kindly give him the names."

"Oh, thank you, Sir William! Should I go now?"

"Er—I think we've nearly done. By the way, my stage-manager is leaving me. Would the man who knows the play be available?"

"Y-es, I should think so."

"You seem doubtful?"

"Well, Mr. Brothers, of course, knows the play, but there's an old friend of mine, Mr. Plam, and I once promised him that if ever I went into management on me own——"

"Allow me to remind you, Miss—er—Dear me! Dear me! Your name has escaped me again! I had it perfectly a moment ago!"

"Nipchin."

"Yes, yes! Of course! Miss Lipchin! Allow me to remind you, Miss Lipchin, that you will not be in management 'on your own.' Strictly speaking, you will not be in management at all. I shall retain control—unless you have any better scheme to suggest?"

"Oh, no. Certainly not," faltered Jilly.

"Then, you see, your promise to your old friend does not apply in this case. Besides, it is to the interest of everybody to have as stage-manager a man who knows the play. I will see him and judge for myself. I think that's all."

He touched the bell. A man-servant stole in without a sound, and Jilly stole after him to the lift. The lift stole up, the gate clicked, and Jilly stole down to the hall.

"Taxi, miss?" asked the porter, with a deferential bow.

"What?" replied Jilly, rather dazed.

"Shall I call you a taxi, miss?"

"Eh? Oh, no, thank you. I'll walk a little—somewhere."

She crept into the Park, and sat down on the first available seat. Far above her, in his regal suite, Sir William Mylchreest was being prepared for the dazzling glories of the evening.

III

It was the morning of the first rehearsal of the play that was to decide the fate of Jilly's five hundred pounds—her entire savings—to say nothing of her reputation as a West End actress. The little stage of the Bodega Theatre was crowded, for the cast was a long one. The players divided themselves naturally into two groups. On the one hand, you had the young, alert, nervous, enthusiastic members of the Westbury Repertory; on the other hand, the players of established West End reputations who had been called in to lend tone, strength, and popularity to the cast.

Jilly, of course, was chatting with the former group. Miss Dinwiddy, too, was there, with Mr. Smallbone, Miss Kewley, Miss Ruggles, Mr.

Brothers, Mr. Rew, and Mr. Hallack, specially engaged to "produce."

The Londoners were Miss Julie Mummery, Miss Hardaway, Miss Mary Raleigh, and Mr. Sam Bover. Miss Mummery we have already met; of the others, what can one say that is not already known to both hemispheres? Miss Hardaway's luscious beauty and startling gowns; Miss Mary Raleigh's caustic witticisms; Mr. Sam Bover's excruciating lisp—are they not all as familiar to the playgoing public as any cure-all upon the hoardings?

The little people from Westbury gazed with badly disguised awe at these miracles of beauty and intelligence. Conscious themselves of keen anxiety as to the result of the venture, they looked in vain for any sign of trepidation on the part of the London favourites. They discussed anything but the play, these great ones. Miss Julie Mummery bemoaned the sad necessity of playing in town at all when so many social functions were demanding her presence, but, as they knew, dear Sir William must not be thwarted, and "Dolly" had added her supplications to those of dear Sir William.

What must it be, thought the Westbury Repertory, to have a great actor-manager on his knees before you, begging you to play an excellent part in an excellent play at an excellent salary? Thrills and tremors!

Miss Hardaway was immensely occupied with a small dog named "Etcetera." "Etcetera" was nearly as famous as his famous mistress. He had been photographed with her one hundred and seven times, and his picture had been cut out of innumerable illustrated papers and pinned up over innumerable beds and chests-of-drawers. He had been lost, advertised for, and found eleven times. Now he was being kissed, and set down, and picked up again, and mumbled over, and fussed more than any human baby could ever expect. Good heavens, what did the play matter if "Etcetera" was not completely and radiantly happy?

Miss Mary Raleigh was chatting with Mr. Sam Bover. Her tones were low, but the matter must have been brilliant in the extreme, for Mr. Bover punctuated it with shrill sniggers every fifteen seconds precisely.

"Well," said Mr. Hallack to Jilly at last, "I should think we might make a start."

"Don't do anything rash!" retorted Jilly, whose grey eyes had an ominous gleam in them.

Mr. Hallack, who had yet to find his feet in London, approached the celestials.

"I think we might begin now," he said.

Miss Mummery looked at the stalls.

"Has Sir William arrived?" she asked icily.

"No, but we've wasted half an hour already. As I'm producing——"

"Oh, but we can't possibly do anything without

Sir William!" chimed in Miss Hardaway. "Etcetera never rehearses unless the manager is in front, do you, my Ducksy-Wucksy-Diddlums?" And the famous beauty buried her classic features in the coat of the wriggling little hound.

Mr. Hallack turned to Jilly.

"What do you say, Miss Nipchin?"

The stars suddenly concentrated their beams on Jilly. Miss Julie Mummery raised her *lorgnette*.

"Why, surely," she cried, "we have met before somewhere?"

Jilly advanced, and eyed the group with a look that meant business.

"Yes, at the Hotel Exquisite," she said. "I was there to arrange for this production with Sir William Mylchreest. We're partners in the venture, and so, in his absence, I guess I got the say. Start the rehearsal, please, Mr. Hallack. Time's money."

Miss Mummery and Miss Hardaway exchanged glances. Miss Raleigh said something in an undertone to Mr. Bover, who had such a terrible fit of giggling that Etcetera barked and yelped for sheer joy and excitement.

"I think you all have your parts?" asked Mr. Hallack.

"I've got mine," replied Miss Mummery. "It's shockingly badly typed. I can't make rhyme or reason of half the lines!"

"Oh, dear, where can mine have got to?" whined Miss Hardaway. "I think Etcetera must have eaten it! Have you gobbled it all up, you naughty little beloved Pipsy-Wipsy-Nigglums?"

A tremendous search was made for Miss Hardaway's part, which was discovered in the stage-doorkeeper's box. The stage was cleared, and Miss Mummery made her first entrance.

"I want you to come in by the centre door," explained Mr. Hallack, "and sit down in this chair right."

Miss Mummery, scanning her part through her *lorgnette*, came slowly down stage, reading aloud the stage directions as she came. It took her fifteen minutes to get this entrance to her satisfaction, and then Sir William Mylchreest arrived. He, also, had a small dog at the end of a string. Sir William raised his hat, most elegantly, to the London ladies, and greeted the Westbury people with a comprehensive bow. Miss Mummery, frankly abandoning the rehearsal, seized one of his hands in both of her own.

"Dear Sir William," she breathed, "how are you after the fatigues of last night?"

"Pretty well! Pretty well!" growled the great actor. "Bob! Look at the rascal! He's all round my legs, trying to trip me up! Look at 'im! Look at 'im!"

Miss Mummery laughed gaily, and Miss Hard-

away languished, and Miss Raleigh said something smart, and Mr. Bover giggled. Then they all rushed to disentangle the famous legs from the dog-lead, and a chair was brought and placed in the centre of the stage close to the floats, and Bob was tied to the leg of the chair. Sir William polished his glasses and called for the property-master.

The property-master, a smiling, jolly individual named Podd, appeared from a recess at the summit of a short upright ladder.

"Yes, Sir William?"

"What about that set I promised to lend Sir Thomas Revill for the Royal *matinée*, Podd?"

"That'll be all right, Sir William. I'm just touching it up a bit now."

"Let me see, which scene was it?"

"Tapestry chamber, Sir William."

"Oh, yes. Podd!"

"Yes, Sir William?"

"I want you to see it set up yourself, Podd."

"Very good, Sir William."

"And, Podd?"

"Yes, Sir William?"

"Give my compliments to Sir Thomas, and tell him I'll attend to the lighting of the scene myself."

"Very good, Sir William."

"And, Podd?"

"Yes, Sir William?"

"I think you'd better take charge of Bob, Podd."

"Very good, Sir William."

Podd came down the upright ladder, and approached Bob, who began to snap and snarl. Miss Hardaway, still grasping the precious Etcetera, screamed a little and ran up-stage, whilst Sir William rebuked Bob for his surly behaviour. The great actor then endeavoured to disentangle Bob from the leg of the chair, during which process his pince-nez fell off and were broken, so that a long interval occurred whilst another pair was fetched from his private room.

Half an hour later, the stars having previous engagements, some for luncheon and others for charity performances, the rehearsal was dismissed.

IV

Jilly took Miss Dinwiddy and Mr. Hallack out to lunch. She was quite candid about her motives.

"You needn't think it's going to be a joy-lunch, because it isn't! I've got to blow off steam or go mad! Three clear soups, waiter, and sharp about it! 'My Ducksy-Wucksy-Diddlums!' Oh, my Gawd!" And she clutched the little table with such vigour that it shook again.

"Things will improve," observed Mr. Hallack,

in his soothing way. "This is only the first rehearsal, you must remember."

"The poor dears had to impress us with their importance at the first rehearsal," Miss Dinwiddy reminded her.

But Jilly would have none of it.

"Importance? Dash their importance! What about my importance! I'd like to set any one of 'em down in the middle of a music-hall stage all by their little lonesomes and see how they got on! Therewouldn't be much Ducksy-Wucksy-Diddlums and Pipsy-Wipsy-Nigglums about that, I can tell 'em! 'Etcetera never rehearses unless the manager is in front!' Oh, 'e don't, don't 'e? He'll be rehearsing all by himself at the end of a half-brick if I get much more of it! I won't stand it, and so I give you fair notice! I've got five hundred Jimmy O'Goblins in that show—five hundred of the best that I earned all on me little own with the sweat of me little brow! D'you think I'm going to see Ducksy-Wucksy-Diddlums do in the lot? Not much! Not for Jilly! Oh, my hat, no!"

Here she took three spoonfuls of soup with extraordinary rapidity.

"And Podd, you know!" she went on with renewed energy. "'I say, Podd! What about me and the King, Podd?' As if his rotten old *matinée* had anything to do with us, and our time, and our play, and our livings! What do they care about

us, these people? Nothing! So much dirt! All right. Let 'em wait! There'll be such an almighty bust-up on that stage one of these days as'll send Pipsy-Wipsy-Nigglums into a ducksy-wucksy fit or my name ain't Jilly Nipchin!"

Mr. Hallack and Nell Dinwiddy exchanged glances. They understood each other. It was far better that Jilly should "blow off steam" here than in the theatre. So they let her run on.

"What do we want with this West End push?" demanded Jilly. "The show went all right at Westbury, didn't it? There's not such a deal of difference, I reckon, between Westbury people and London people? I told him so. I told him I wanted nothing better than the show we gave there, but he talked me down. Oh, a tremendous lot about his experience! I don't say he isn't experienced, but there's such a thing, to my mind, as being too experienced. Mark my words, this show's going to be ruined in London!"

Here Miss Dinwiddy and Mr. Hallack felt bound to protest. They pointed out that Sir William undoubtedly knew his public. A long string of successes proved that. Every theatre had its special public, and the Bodega public must have the Bodega traditions upheld.

"Then all I can say is," retorted Jilly, "that we're in the wrong theatre! That's what's the matter! This isn't a swell Society play, and nothing will make it into one, not all the Bobs and

Podds and Mummerys and Bovers and Raleighs and Hardaways in the blooming world! Dash it, I s'pose I've got a bit of a name as well as them? Any one would think the halls and the theatres was as far apart as Heaven and the other place! See 'em jump when they get a chance of taking money from the halls! Not 'arf! Oh, I'm sorry, Nell, but you shouldn't have anything to do with such a vulgar little wretch!"

Towards the end of luncheon, she calmed down a little, and even managed to laugh over certain events of the morning. But anxiety returned when she was alone in her flat. She could not boast of Sir William's vast and rather tiresome experience, but she had a keen instinct for all things of the theatre, and she felt convinced that the two schools—the old and the new—would never harmonise. The new wanted realism; the old wanted convention. That was the whole matter in a nutshell.

None the less, Jilly kept herself well in hand for the next few days. Austin Dawes, the author, was present at the rehearsals, and no day passed on which he was not urged—which almost amounted to a command—to alter his play in order to bring it within the conventional West End scope.

"I'll tell you what's happening," he told Jilly. "They're gradually taking all the devil out of it."

"Well," she retorted, "why do you put up with

it? Why don't you tackle old Mylchreest about it?"

"I have tackled him. He says that he has devoted the whole of his life to discovering what the West End public wants, and that he is convinced they must be pampered. I'm worried to death about the business. I'll never write another play as long as I live."

"Oh, that's silly," said Jilly. "We'll pull this out of the fire yet. Don't you fear."

When the play had been in rehearsal about a week, the Royal *matinée* began to absorb Sir William's attention. This was a great chance for Hallack, Jilly, and the author. They stood together, and something of the old spirit began to creep back into the piece. Mr. Smallbone raised his head a little, Miss Kewley and Miss Ruggles spoke their lines with more confidence, and Jilly succeeded in sending Podd into a genuine fit of laughter. There was a tradition at the Bodega that if Podd laughed during the rehearsals the play was all right. But it was unlike Podd's usual tact to laugh at a new-comer, and a new-comer from the halls at that. The atmosphere grew electric.

It was on the very day that Podd laughed, and towards the close of the rehearsal, that Miss Hardaway found serious fault with one of the lines. Her part had already been altered out of all recognition, in order that she might rely on getting the "sympathy" of the audience for a

woman that the author had intended to be loathed. Now she objected to being spoken of by one of the other characters as a cat.

"I must have that out, if you please," said Miss Hardaway.

Mr. Hallack turned to the author.

"What do you say, Mr. Dawes?"

"I see no objection to the word," replied Mr. Dawes.

Miss Hardaway smiled, not very pleasantly.

"I daresay not, Mr. Dawes, but I do. And Sir William promised me that any alteration should be made in the play that I wished."

The statement was so staggering that even Podd whistled. A glance from Miss Hardaway, however, sent him scuttling back to his nest at the summit of the upright ladder.

"If Sir William really promised that——" began Mr. Dawes.

"Do you doubt my word?" demanded Miss Hardaway, who had played in more melodramas than she cared to remember.

"Oh, of course not," observed the author.

"Very well, then! I object to being called a cat, and I must insist that the word be altered."

This drew Jilly into the transaction. Flesh and blood could stand it no longer. She had submitted to seeing her own part whittled down, and she had taken no outward notice of Miss Hardaway's private slights and rudenesses, but this insistence

on the right of any player to have the play altered as she chose brought down the scales with a bump.

"If Mr. Dawes wishes the word to stand, it must stand," she put in quietly.

Miss Hardaway swung round like a big ship in a small harbour, and glared at Jilly.

"Indeed, Miss Nipchin? And may I enquire what it has to do with you?"

"You may!" returned Jilly, jumping up from her place in the stalls. "This play is being put up with my money. And money talks. Mr. Dawes has already made so many alterations that the whole spirit of the thing is gone, and I refuse to let him make any more. If he does, out I go! That's pretty straight, isn't it?"

"It's exactly what I should have expected from you," retorted Miss Hardaway.

"I wonder!" said Jilly. "If you ask me, I think you expected me to sit here and see you and your rotten puppy-dog muck up the whole caboodle!"

A significant hush fell upon the theatre. Miss Hardaway's imperious manner and biting tongue were a byword in the profession. For years she had snubbed authors with impunity, and caused plays to be hacked about to bring them into line with her own tastes and wishes. Stage-directions were nothing to Miss Hardaway. No play had a soul of its own in which she condescended to appear. If Euclid himself had attempted to reason

with her, he would have received precisely the same treatment as the defunct Mr. Shakespeare and the living Mr. Dawes. Miss Hardaway would have explained to him, in her best stage-society manner, that the part, if it happened to be her own part, was greater than the whole.

"That," replied Miss Hardaway, after a dramatic pause, "is quite sufficient. I have disliked this engagement from the first, but Sir William overruled my objections. Now he will see that I was right."

She was walking off the stage when Jilly, who had darted through the little pass-door, suddenly confronted her. With all deference to Mr. Austin Dawes, Mr. Hallack felt that the contrast these two women presented was better than any scene in the play.

"'Arf a mo!" said Jilly, deliberately dropping back into the vernacular of her early youth.

"Well, my good woman, what is it?"

"You said you disliked this engagement from the first. May I ask why?"

"If you like, but I should advise you not to."

"Well, I do like! See? What was the matter with the engagement?"

"Since you press me, I'm not accustomed to acting with amateurs"—she pronounced it "amateurs"—"and music-hall people."

"Ho! So thet's it, eh? Then jest allow me ter say this, Miss 'Ardaway. As fer self, I'm

nothing, see? Nit! Dirt! Muck! But these boys an' gels as 'ave come from Westbury ter play in this piece is artists! Understand me? Artists, every jack one! They don't get yore salary, nor yet mine, but I'm proud to play with 'em, and I've put up with a lot rather'n see 'em chucked out of a job and lose their chance of making a hit in London! That's wot I think of the people yew call amachoor! As for yore part, I don't care two pins whether you play it or not. It's dead easy because it's well written, same as mine. I expected this dust-up, and the lady who played the part at Westbury is living in my flat at this moment ready to go on. See? So yew can walk out as quick as you like, and take Pipsy-Wipsy-Niggglums with yer! And *that's* bang orf the ice!"

Miss Hardaway, drawing her skirts about her, went.

V

Sir William Mylchreest, arriving at the theatre half an hour later, and finding Mr. Rew reading for Miss Hardaway, enquired the reason.

Mr. Hallack explained that Miss Hardaway had thrown up her part.

"Why?" asked Sir William, setting his back-teeth.

"Becos I told 'er off," said Jilly, who had back-teeth of her own.

Sir William waved his hand.

"Dismiss the rehearsal. Will you kindly step into my private room, Miss Bone?"

Jilly, with a wink at Nell Dinwiddy, followed the majestic figure and silvery hair from the stage.

"Pray sit down," began Sir William. "Will you smoke a cigarette?"

"No, thank you." But the very offer was disarming. Jilly steeled herself.

"Will you excuse me if I smoke?"

"Oh, certingly."

Sir William, with great deliberation, lit a cigarette in his most adorable stage manner, and then took a chair very close to Jilly's.

"Now," he said, and then there was a long pause.

Just as Jilly was about to thank him for this interesting conversation, and withdraw from the presence, he went on:

"How long have you been on the stage, my dear?"

"'Bout seven year," replied Jilly.

"And I was an old hand at this game before you were born. Think of that! Before you were born, long before you were born, I had been all through the grinding, *grinding*, *GRINDING* mill!"

Jilly thought of it. She felt that this was no argument, that the conversation was already running off the rails, but the voice, and the manner, and the silvery hair, and the lined face, and the expressive eyes were having an effect upon her despite her intelligent wariness. The old simile of the bird and the snake came into her mind. She wondered, without actually putting the thought into words, whether the snake appeals to the bird's sense of veneration?

"Yes, my dear child, I had been all through it before you were born, and I am going through it still. The public think that the few of us who have climbed to the top of the tree have no more worries! That we can do as we like! Good heavens!" He rumbled his silvery hair. "If only we could! If only we could produce the plays we like, with the casts we like, in the way we like!" His voice sank to a very deep note. "We can't do it, my dear child! The struggle never ends! We are never free! We are slaves to the end—the slaves of the public!

"I want you to learn that. You have great talent—a great career before you!" (Oh, dash the beastly tears! It's all up with J. N. if he sees 'em!) "I have watched your work on the stage, and I know as surely as I know anything that you have the true gift—the real thing—the golden treasure that so few possess! I believe and

hope that you will rise to the very top of your profession!"

"Thanks!" said Jilly, blinking very fast and taking an immense interest in an old playbill on the wall.

"But let me give you one word of warning, my dear child. Don't start your career—for you are really just starting it, despite your successes—don't start your career by making enemies! Don't do it! *Don't do it! DON'T DO IT!* It's so unnecessary! A little tact, a little yielding, a smile instead of a frown, and what a world of difference! The anger gone; the difficulty smoothed away; a friend made instead of an enemy!

"About this trivial incident this afternoon, now. I had a telephone-message from Miss—er—Miss Hardaway. She's in great distress! She is, indeed! She feels that you have taken a dislike to her—that you wish her to throw up the part! Of course, as I told her, you wish nothing of the sort! You know that she is a great favourite, that she has a charming personality, that she will be one of the factors of our success! And—as I replied to her—knowing all those things, how could you possibly wish her to throw up the part? You don't, do you, my dear?"

"Oh, no, not if——"

"There! I was sure of it, and she will, of course, return to-morrow morning. But do just let me take this opportunity of warning you

against these rather pitiful little scenes in the theatre. Of what use are they? Whom can they possibly benefit? The play? The company? The author? No, no, no! They're a mistake, my dear, a very great mistake! Have nothing to do with them! Make up your mind never, on any account, to be led into them, and your stage career will be all the happier for it, and you will win—as you assuredly deserve to win—a multitude of friends instead of a host of enemies!"

He laid his fatherly hand upon her shoulder and led her to the door. It was a pretty and a touching sight. Jilly, lingering in the passage to wipe her eyes, knew that she was vanquished. The forty years' experience had done it! Right or wrong, the word "cat" would come out of the script on the morrow, and Miss Hardaway would crowd on more sail than ever.

VI

Sir William's recipe for perfect happiness in the theatre notwithstanding, as the date of production drew nearer, the spirits of the author, and Jilly, and the little people from Westbury sank lower and lower. They all felt that the play was dead. It had been so tinkered at, and polished, and altered to please the palate of "the most

pampered public in the world" that nothing remained but a neat little skeleton.

The Royal *matinée* was over, and Sir William had been able to devote the whole of his time to rehearsals. In that genial presence, Miss Hardaway had gradually burst into full bloom, rivalled only by Miss Julie Mummery. The latter lady, who had to represent the wife of a poor country doctor, appeared at the dress-rehearsal in a lovely creation by Paquin. Anything more complacent than the lady thus arrayed was never seen on the West End stage, and that is saying a good deal.

"Good Lord!" cried poor Austin Dawes, who, as a critic, should have been prepared for anything. "Is she going to wear *that*?"

He was sitting in the stalls with Jilly, who was ready for her part of Sarah, the smutty-faced kitchen-maid.

"Of course not," replied Jilly. "I expect she has to go on to some at home or something after the rehearsal."

"But this is the final rehearsal, and I want to see the dresses. Why shouldn't she be dressed as at night? All the others are!"

"I dunno. Let's ask Hallack."

So they got hold of the producer, who informed them, with a weary, hysterical giggle, that Miss Mummery had every intention of wearing that dress the next evening.

Austin Dawes went into the corridor and swore

most horribly. He was so overwrought with the endless rehearsals and all the anxiety that he could have rushed screaming into the street.

But he didn't. He returned to the auditorium, where he found Sir William, with Jilly at his elbow, talking suavely across the floats to Miss Mummery.

"Charming, my dear! Charming! You don't think it too good for the part, do you?"

Miss Mummery was at once in arms. As a mother will fight for her child, or a cow for her calf, or a goose for her goslings, so Miss Mummery was prepared to fight for that Paquin gown. She saw the sketches in the evening-papers; she read the descriptions; she heard the envious murmurs of the women in the stalls! If the dress didn't suit the part, the part must be made to suit the dress! Nothing simpler!

She came down to the floats, shielding her eyes from the glare and searching for Sir William behind the voice.

"I beg your pardon, Sir William?"

"I was just wondering, my dear, whether your frock, charming as it is, was not a little too charming for the part?"

Miss Mummery visibly stiffened. She meant the stiffening to be visible. On the eve of the production, even Sir William Mylchreest was in the hollow of her hand.

"I fail to see, Sir William, how any dress could be too charming for the Bodega Theatre."

"Quite so! Quite so!" agreed Sir William.

Miss Mummery smiled sweetly, turned, and retired up stage, the long train of the country doctor's wife—who, by the way, was spending the evening alone with her family—sweeping the stage-cloth as she went.

"It's idiotic!" snapped Jilly in an undertone.

"Steady! Steady!" breathed the great manager.

"But it is! You must see it! The author's nearly crazy about it! Here's this woman, in a little country home, sitting with her husband and children and doing a little knitting in a fifty-guinea frock! There's no sense in it! We shall be guyed off the stage!"

"Gently! Gently! We must give and take! Give and take!"

"We can give all right," muttered Jilly, "but I'm blest if we shall take!"

VII

Jilly was in her dressing-room. In less than an hour, the curtain would rise on the second performance in London of the play in which she had staked her all.

Yes, the first-night was over and the papers had

done their worst. The play was utterly feeble, inconsistent, *banal*. What could Westbury have seen in it? What was it doing at the Bodega Theatre? Why were such plays written? And so on and so on, one paper after another, until Jilly threw them all into a corner and gave herself up to shouts of ironic laughter.

What a farce it had been, that first performance! The stifling theatre, the jaded audience, the still more jaded critics, Sir William and Lady Mylchreest in a box with faces of non-committal stone, Sir Thomas Revill and Lady Revill in another box with faces of non-committal lead!

The great "receptions" for Miss Mummery, Miss Hardaway, Miss Raleigh, and Mr. Sam Bover. The faithful friends in the pit who had applauded Jilly. The icy welcome extended to the unknown young players from Westbury! What a farce! What a bitter little farce!

The finish—with Sir William Mylchreest's box discreetly empty, and Sir Thomas Revill's box discreetly empty, and half the stalls allotted to the hurried critics empty! And the calls, with Miss Mummery trailing on and off in the Paquin gown, and Miss Hardaway being incredibly luscious at her friends in stalls and boxes, and Miss Raleigh very pert and spry, and Mr. Bover, with one hand on his heart, dreaming of management, and Jilly giving a little bob that delighted her friends in the pit!

Miss Mummery had forgiven her, and Miss Hardaway had congratulated her, and the sycophantic dresser had assured her that the play was a "go," and the author had thanked her for leading a forlorn hope with such pluck!

So much for the first-night.

"Now," said Jilly to herself, as she smeared in the black smudges, "to get the play back to its proper shape and give 'em the show that we gave at Westbury!"

A tap at the door. Would Miss Nipchin see Mr. James Rhimes, of the Transatlantic Exchange Variety Artistes' Association?

"Transatlantic?" thought Jilly. "That's got something to do with America!" Yes, she would see Mr. Rhimes.

Mr. Rhimes came in briskly, despite the heat of the weather, and briskly got to work. He was a small, clean-shaven, spare man, who looked as if he would live to a hundred-and-eighty and keep working at full pressure all the time.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Nipchin. Sorry to see you've struck a snag."

"I didn't know we had," replied Jilly.

"No? Well, Miss Nipchin, that's one way of taking it. You can either take it lying down and save your money or put up a fight and lose it. If you take my advice, you'll play for safety this journey."

"Did you come in to tell me that?"

"No, Miss Nipchin, I did not. I can mind my own business as well as most men, I hope, and I thank you for the gentle hint. I came to ask you whether you might possibly care for a little run round the United States, with a pretty good piece of money to bring home at the end of it."

Jilly turned and looked steadily at Mr. Rhimes.

"What makes you come and ask me that?"

"Just business."

"Nothing else?"

"I don't understand you."

"Nobody put you up to it?"

"Certainly not. I think and act for myself. I've been watching you a goodish while, Miss Nipchin. I've been waiting for the right moment to jump in and get you for the other side. This seems to me the moment. If I'm wrong, say the word and I'll get on with the next job."

"Why did you think this was the moment?"

"From what I said when I first came in. You've hit a snag. There's no good blinking it. You got the wrong end of the season, a bad press, and a bad play."

"No!" shouted Jilly. "I won't have that! I know what this play ought to be, and London's going to see what it ought to be, if it costs me every penny I've got. I'm obliged to you for your offer, Mr. Rhimes, and I should very much like to go to America for more reasons than one, but I'm not going to turn tail and let this show down

before it's had half or a quarter of a chance! I'm not that sort! I'm not cut out, maybe, for West End management! I believe in sticking by the author, and giving his play as he wrote it, and giving the big public a chance to see that play!"

Mr. Rhimes bowed.

"Miss Nipchin," said he, "I admire you more than I can say. I've not had all the decent feeling knocked out of me yet, even at my game, and I wish you all the luck in the world with your enterprise! How long can you hold out?"

"I dunno. Good deal depends on Sir William, of course, but he can't shut down in less than three weeks unless I agree."

"I understand. In three weeks' time, Miss Nipchin, I shall call on you again. In the meantime, if you'll allow me, I'll communicate with New York and make certain provisional arrangements about your contracts here. Now I'm going round to the front of the house, I'm going to buy a seat for the show to-night, and I'm going to put my hands together until they're mincemeat! To our next!"

For a week, naturally, the business was deplorable. At the end of the week, up went the notice. From that moment, the play picked up each night. The old "laughs" were recovered; the old spirit gradually returned.

But it was too late. The money would not hold out, and the weather was still sweltering. On

one evening only did rain fall, and then the receipts were doubled in five minutes.

Sir William and Lady Mylchreest had left the country for cooler climes. Jilly wrote a passionate letter to the manager, pointing out that the play was slowly turning the corner, and offering to mortgage her salary to keep it running. She received the following telegram in reply.

"The condemnation was universal. I see no hope. Rely on my long experience."

So that ended the matter. The company broke up. The theatre shut down and turned a blue face to the world. The little Westbury people went into country cottages; the stars went on visits to country mansions; the author went into a home of rest.

As for Jilly, she went to the United States of America with a contract in her pocket for thirty-five weeks at a thousand dollars a week. When she showed this piece of paper to Miss Hardaway and Miss Mummery—and I have never denied that Jilly was human—those dear creatures kissed her with the greatest affection.

CHAPTER IX

THE GOLDEN GATE

I

BEHOLD Jilly stretched out on a steamer-chair, a rug about her legs, an unopened book in her hand, staring rather miserably at the Atlantic Ocean. Never before, strange as it may seem, had she been upon the sea. Most of us begin with a narrow strip, such as the Channel, but Jilly had flung herself, characteristically enough, at the Atlantic Ocean.

At her side was Dorothy Hollis, who had grown into a remarkably pretty girl since the days when Jilly had rescued her from poverty and a scolding mother, and taken Dorothy to live with her as companion. Dorothy, also, was wrapped in a rug and stared at the Atlantic, but her expression was far from miserable. On the contrary, she seemed unusually happy and excited.

"My word," said Jilly, "it's an awful lot of water, kid!"

"Yes! Isn't it lovely!" rhapsodised Dorothy.

"Dunno so much about lovely. I wish I was safe at home in me own little flat!"

"Oh, Jilly, how can you say that when the sun's shining on the sea, and you're going to a beautiful engagement in that beautiful country!"

"Engagement?" echoed Jilly. "You mean the contract for 'vaudeville,' I suppose? That isn't the kind of engagement I want! There! Now I've said it!"

"Oh, but the other is sure to happen! I know it will! When Mr. Chauncey hears——"

"Tcht!" Jilly glanced apprehensively about her. "Be careful, Dolly! You mustn't say a word about Ed Chauncey or my contract on the halls. If you do, it may spoil everything. This boat's full of Americans, and some of them are theatrical folk. So you will be careful, won't you?"

Dorothy was all repentance.

"I'm so sorry! I won't say another word! Really and truly I won't! But we can talk about it to each other in whispers, can't we?"

Jilly laughed.

"Oh, yes, we can talk in whispers, kid, or out of whispers so long as you don't mention names."

"Well, then," whispered Dolly, so cautiously that even Jilly could only just hear her, "what I was going to say is this: Mister No-Matter-Who is just pining away for love of Miss Never-Mind. There!"

Squeamish as she felt, and consequently reluc-

tant to move an inch, Jilly felt compelled to turn her head sufficiently to stare at Dolly.

"What on earth are you talking about, kid?"

Dorothy, nearly bursting with suppressed excitement and information, nodded her little head a great many times with wonderful rapidity.

"But I don't understand!" exclaimed Jilly. "How can you know that?"

"I do know, all the same. And I know something else!"

"About——?"

"About Mister No-Matter-Who. Yes. I know that it was high time you came to America."

"High time? Why?"

A sudden pang of jealousy seized hold of Jilly. She wondered why she had never felt it before. Ed was very good-looking and had charming manners. He was, in short, a very fascinating fellow. Why in the world, then, had it not occurred to her that America was full of young women on the look-out for good-looking husbands with fascinating manners? The pangs were so awful that they completely cured the symptoms of sea-sickness.

"Because," announced Dorothy solemnly, "he wants looking after."

"Looking after? Is he ill?"

"No."

"Has he taken to drink?"

"No."

"Well, what is it? Why don't you tell me? Has some beast of a girl——?"

"No."

"Huh! What a relief!" Jilly, frightened no longer, behaved rather ungratefully.

"I don't believe you know anything about him at all," she observed, with a fine show of indifference. "How could you? You're only trying to frighten me."

"I'm not. And I do know something."

"Well, then, out with it this instant or I'll chuck you into the sea and a shark will eat you!"

"He's practising a very dangerous trick."

"I know that! Leaving me in the lurch! Serve him right if he lost me altogether!"

"I don't mean that sort of trick. I mean a real trick—part of his business."

"His business as an equilibberist?"

"Yes. It's the most difficult thing ever been done. Nobody knows exactly what it is except that he's booked to do it in New York about ten days after we land. Can't you guess why he's doing it? I can."

"Because he doesn't care what happens, I suppose. The silly Juggins!"

"No, that isn't it. It's because he'll get a tremendous lot of money for it, and, if he gets a tremendous lot of money, he can ask Miss Never-Mind to marry him. I think it's splendid of him, Jilly! I think he's been splendid all through!

There aren't so many men in the world who'd run away from a girl because she was earning too much money!"

Jilly did not reply. She was thinking deeply—as well she might. Suddenly she turned on Dorothy.

"By the way, miss, how do you know all this?"

Dorothy blushed. There was no doubt about it. A delicate blush spread all over her face and neck, making her even prettier than usual.

"Out with it!" commanded Jilly, suddenly feeling very grown-up. "I'm responsible for you as well as meself. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing," said Dorothy, enjoying the situation despite her embarrassment.

"Yes, you have! I saw that blush! Who is it? Tell me all about it, kid, or I'll have the boat turned round and take you back to England!"

"Oh, no, don't do that!" Dorothy clasped her hands. "He's very nice, he really is, and we had all the deck to ourselves!"

"Oh, you had, had you? Nice goings on, I must say! When, if you please?"

"This morning. Don't you remember I got up and came out on deck quite early? Well, he was out, too, and it seemed silly to keep passing each other and saying nothing. So when he'd taken off his hat eleven times, I suppose I smiled a little. I couldn't help it—really and truly I

couldn't. And then he smiled, and the next thing was I was looking through his glasses at a ship a long way off."

"Indeed?" Jilly was very stern and superior. "And did he tell you all this about Ed?"

"Well, yes, in a way—yes."

"In a way? In what sort of a way? Out with it or I call the Captain!"

"Oh, no, no! I'll tell you everything. He's an American actor, and he's been over to London to play in a piece that failed, and he seemed to think that you and I had something to do with the stage——"

"Really? Mr. Clever-Shanks!"

"I don't know how he guessed, because you're Miss Meredith all right in the passenger-list. Anyway, he did, and so he lent me a New York theatrical paper, and there I saw about Ed."

"You sly little thing! Have you got that paper now?"

"Yes," said Dorothy.

"Then go and fetch it at once!"

"I needn't fetch it. It's here."

"Here? Where?"

"I'm sitting on it."

For the next ten minutes there was dead silence, as Jilly read and re-read the paragraph about Ed Chauncey. When she looked up, her face was very white.

"Do you feel ill, dear?" asked Dorothy anxiously.

"No. I'm all right. Do you know the name of this American actor?"

"Oh, yes. He gave me his card." Dorothy produced it with a flourish.

"'Augustus Dinck,' " read Jilly. "What's Augustus doing at the present moment, kid?"

"I'm not sure."

"Have a guess."

Dorothy screwed up her eyes and bit her lip and clenched her fists to show how hard she was guessing.

"I should guess," she said at last, "that he was just round the other side of the deck staring at the porpoises through his glasses."

"That's a pretty good guess, kid. You'd better go and see if you've guessed right. If you have, I'd like a few words with Augustus."

"You're not going to scold him, Jilly? We couldn't help talking—really and truly we couldn't."

"I don't say I am and I don't say I'm not. Just you go and fetch Augustus away from those silly porpoises."

II

Mr. Augustus Dinck came walking as delicately as the roll of the ship would allow. He

was a tall man, about twenty-eight to thirty years of age, with that air of being perfectly at home on an Atlantic liner typical of the travelled American. The English are a sea-going race, and they indicate the fact by looking thoroughly tousled and uncomfortable on the deck of a steamer. They crumple their collars as they mount the gangway, and they keep them crumpled until they leave the ship. The women, having no collars to crumple, do the best they can with their hair. Neatness is flung overboard until the moment comes to step ashore. Their walks on deck are accompanied by a patter of hairpins nearly resembling hail.

Dorothy, very shyly, made the introductions. She was then told to go and look for distant ships, whilst Mr. Dinck, at Jilly's invitation, dropped into the vacant chair.

"I trust," began Mr. Dinck, "you are enjoying the trip, Miss Meredith."

"Don't be a humbug!" retorted Jilly.

"I'll try not," replied Mr. Dinck, without so much as the flicker of an eyelid.

"That'll save a lot of time, because humbug don't pay with yours truly. If you had your way, you'd like me to be stretched out in me bunk the entire voyage!"

"Somebody's been giving me a bad character," said Mr. Dinck, with a slight smile.

"That's right, and I'll tell you who gave it you. Old man Adam."

"I've had a down on that old feller for quite a while, Miss Meredith. It's too bad of him to keep tripping me up this way. What's he been telling you?"

"He told me that there was a very pretty little girl on board who gets out on deck early in the morning. And he told me that you had a pair of glasses handy for looking at ships in the what-you-call-it."

"Why, if that's all he told you, the old man let me down lightly."

"Don't be too sure of that. He told me that the trip was only just begun, and that one day on board ship was as full of opportunities as a month ashore."

"That's another rotten old dud—Old Man Opportunity. Seems to me you and I could write a pretty fair sequel to 'Pilgrim's Progress,' Miss Meredith."

"Chuck it, then, and talk straight. I'm looking after that kid, see? I'm not a Spoil-Sport, but I don't want her getting serious. One of that sort," she added, musingly, "is about enough in a party of two."

"Tell me what to do, Miss Meredith, and I'll do it. I'm not quite old enough for the heavy father, but I might manage Uncle Jim, though I

don't mind telling you Cousin Jack would come easier."

"What's the matter with Brother Harry?"

"Right you are! We'll make it Brother Harry. But don't forget it takes two to play at that brother business."

"You're not at all stuck on yourself, are you?" quizzed Jilly.

"I don't know that I am."

"Well, I don't think you are. It's a pity," she added, with an effort at carelessness, "that we haven't got a mutual friend."

"Maybe we have?" suggested Mr. Dinck.

"Not very likely. I don't know many Americans very well. This is the first time I've been across, you see."

"But what about England? A good many Americans find their way to your country, Miss Meredith."

"Yes, I suppose they do. But I don't think I—— Oh, well, yes, I do know one man rather well, but I daresay you wouldn't know him yourself."

"Might I ask his name?"

"Chauncey."

"Not dear old Ed?" Mr. Dinck's countenance radiated such enthusiasm at the mention of Ed that Jilly almost jumped from her chair and kissed him. But there were other passengers near by, so she restrained herself, and merely replied:

"Yes, that's his first name, I believe."

"You don't say! Well, of all the luckiest turns! Why, Ed and I foregather at the Kittens' every night of our lives!"

"What's that? A pub?"

"Oh, no! Not a pub—a club!"

"Same thing, sometimes."

"Sometimes, but not in this case. The Kittens' Club is famous all over the world. Ed Chauncey is a very well-known member."

"A letter addressed there would find him, eh?"

"For sure! Or I'd be only too happy to take a message!"

"I don't know that I shall need to send one. All depends on how you behave yourself, Mr. Dinck."

"If Brother Harry should develop into Cousin Jack, eh?"

"Then I should have to get busy, as you say, with the telephone to the Kittens' Club. How's Ed looking, by the way?"

"Well, when I saw him last, which was about two months ago, I didn't fancy him. He seemed depressed. Been that way, for the matter of that, ever since he came back from your side. You don't happen to know, Miss Meredith, if there was a lady in the case?"

"How should I know?"

"No offence, I hope?"

"Certainly not."

"Thanks. Well, some of us thought it might be that, but Ed never let on. All the same, we don't feel easy about him. Have you heard of this new stunt he's putting up at the Rotterdam?"

"What's that?"

"Why, it's a fool sort of a thing, though it means big money. You know his old act—balancing himself by one hand on a pile of chairs? Well, he's going about three better than that. On the back of the highest chair he places a big ball. He balances himself on the ball, and then he takes a steel rod and places one end of it on the ball. As far as I can get at it, he means to hoist himself up this steel rod, and stand on one hand at the very top of the whole bunch. When you consider that the foundation of the structure is a table and chairs, so that it's impossible to place a net to catch him if he should fall——! Why, Miss Meredith, what's the matter? You look as white as a sheet? Shall I call a stewardess? Would you like some brandy?"

"No, no! I'm all right, thanks. It's—only—the ship. When does Ed do this stunt?"

"As nearly as I remember, about a week after we land."

"Oh, yes, that's right."

"You knew?"

"Dolly—my little friend—saw it in a paper you lent her. I'd forgotten."

"That's a sweet name—Dolly," murmured

Augustus Dinck, gazing at the horizon with round eyes and a drooping mouth.

Jilly made no reply. She was busily thinking.

"It seems to suit her!" purred Augustus. "That lovely fair hair, and those blue eyes, and—— Now, Cousin Jack, keep your distance! Brother Harry, one pace to the front, march!"

Jilly seemed perfectly oblivious of all this. Ed was risking his life for her—so that he might earn a big pile of money and be able to ask her to be his wife. What idiots men were sometimes! What in the world did it matter which had the money so long as there was enough to live on?

He might kill himself practising! This thought sent a shudder all through her! She felt an impulse to dash to the wireless cabin and send a long message forbidding the turn! But what right had she? None at all! The thing was maddening!

She must hatch a plot. There must be some way of preventing the turn. He would practise it with a net, and the net would not be discarded until he was ready to perform; not, certainly, before the final week. But how could she endure the slow agony of the voyage? Every day would be a torture!

"Funny about names!" Mr. Dinck was muttering. "Some girls might be called Dolly and you'd never turn your head to look at them. And then you meet one girl called Dolly, and you real-

ise at once that no other name could possibly suit her! Yes, it's just right! Just exactly right! Don't you think so, Miss Meredith?"

"What's that?" asked Jilly absently.

"Don't you think the name Dolly—if you'll pardon my mentioning it—seems to suit your little friend just like a glove?"

"I daresay it does."

"I know it does! Those eyes! That hair! That sweet little appealing manner! That way of looking up at a man! That——!"

"Quick!" cried Jilly. "Get a life-belt! Brother Harry's gone overboard!"

III

Ed Chauncey, having spent the morning risking his neck in the practice-room at the Rotterdam, and the afternoon training every spare ounce of flesh off his wiry body, was sitting all alone in a corner of the reading-room of the Kittens' Club. Once the cheeriest of mortals, he now fancied himself the most miserable. Being in strict training, he could neither drink nor smoke; being in love, he took no pleasure in the society of his fellow-clubmen.

Suddenly this little mountain of misery hears himself hailed from the doorway.

"What, Ed, boy!"

"Gus Dinck! Well!"

Forgetting his rôle for the moment, Ed rushed to meet his old friend. They settled down in Ed's corner to exchange news. They talked about the failure of Dinek's play in England, and Ed's forthcoming stunt in New York. And then Augustus got to work on his real mission.

"Say, Ed, there was a friend of yours on our boat coming across."

"There usually is, old man."

"Oh, not that sort of friend. A real friend. Rather a particular friend, I should fancy."

Ed stared hard but said nothing. Mr. Dinck, knowing what was coming, felt sorry for him. But a plot is a plot, and it was all for Ed's good at the finish, to say nothing of a little bit on the side for A. Dinck.

"She was travelling steerage, but I happened across her."

"Steerage?" gasped Ed.

"Yes—poor kid. Pretty rotten luck, eh?"

"Who—who was it?"

"Miss Jilly Nipchin."

Ed Chauncey went very white. Mr. Dinck had to harden his heart.

"Steerage?" whispered Ed. "But why? She's got plenty of money—any amount of stuff! Why, she was getting four times my salary when I left England!"

"That may be, but it's gone, every halfpenny of it."

"My God! She must have fallen sick! Is she sick? Tell me, quick!"

"Steady, old man! No, she ain't sick. But she put all she had into a play in London, and the play failed. So her name's mud."

"And what's she doing in New York, for the love of heaven? This is no place for a girl that's broke! Where is she? I must look after her! Give me her address!"

He had jumped to his feet. Mr. Dinck, with difficulty, persuaded him to sit down again for a few moments.

"I'll give you the address in a minute, Ed. It's away down town—some fifth-rate boarding-house. She would go there. I tried to lend her some stuff but she wouldn't touch it. I never met a gal with such a backbone to her."

"I know! Lord, she'd never touch a penny from anybody—not even from me, let alone you!"

"Thanks, old man."

"That's all right. I know you meant well, Gus, but you don't understand Jilly. She's one in a thousand! In a million! If I told you half of the things that girl's done off her own bat——! Where's the address?"

"Just a minute. I'm going to give it you all

right, but I want you to do me a little bit of a favour in return."

"This isn't like you, Gus—bargaining over a thing like this."

"No, I don't say it is, but all's fair in love and war, they say."

"Love and war!" Ed glared at Mr. Dinck as though he would leap at his throat. "Say, Gus, I don't like that grin you've got on. Cut it out, boy! We used to be chums!"

"And we're going to stay chums. I'm in love with Miss Jilly all right——"

"If this don't beat cock-fightin'!"

"Hold on a bit. There's more than one way of being in love. I'm not in love with her that way. I might have been, but it so happened I w the other first."

"The other? What other?"

"Why, her little pal."

"Didn't she come alone?"

"Nope."

"Brought a maid along in the steerage, I suppose?"

"No, but she brought her little friend, Miss Dorothy Hollis." Here Mr. Dinck paused a moment to kiss the tips of his fingers and wave them at the ceiling. "Say, Ed, when I first come across that kid playing round the deck before breakfast——"

"What were you doing in the steerage before breakfast?"

Mr. Dinck was a first-class poker-player. Not a muscle or an eyelash admitted the mistake.

"I always walk right round the ship before breakfast. Always have. And when I came across that little vision of a kid with her blue eyes, and her golden hair——! Did you know her name was Dolly, Ed?"

"Is it?"

"'Is it?' Just hear this man! Why, that's the only name——!"

"Are you in earnest over this, Gus? None of your games with any pal of Jilly's, mind!"

"Games? Look here, Ed, you know my mother and you know my sister. I want to take both the girls right along there, and my old mother will look after them until——well, until something's settled. Will you back me up in that? It's all the favour I want!"

"And not a bad move, either, old son, from your end of the stick. But I doubt if Jilly will go. She won't be beholden. I know her better than to think that."

"But if you and Jilly get fixed up——"

A sudden thought seemed to strike Ed Chauncey. A queer little smile twisted his lean face.

"My Lord, Gus, it's funny the way things happen! Have you heard about my new stunt?"

"Heard about it? I should say I had! You'll have to chuck that now, Ed!"

"I can't."

"Can't? Why not?"

"I never broke a contract yet."

"But this is different."

"It isn't different—not for the other party to the contract. Look at the walls! They've sunk money on it. It's got to go through. But, by gosh, it's funny."

"Pretty risky sort of stunt, isn't it?"

"Never been attempted," said Ed simply.

"That talks."

"Yes. . . . Why couldn't Jilly have stayed away another week? Then I should have been at the top of the tree or—the roots."

"You'll be a fool to go on with it, Ed."

"I'm going on. That's straight. There's such a thing as honour, boy, even in the vaudeville business. But that don't help me wondering why things happen this way. Got any theory on the subject, Gus?"

"Nope."

"Then let's fetch the girls out of that dime hash-house."

IV

Ed Chauncey and Jilly faced each other in the shabby, gloomy little parlour of the down-town

boarding-house, New York City. Mr. Augustus Dinck and Dorothy Hollis had just left the room, *en route* for the White Lights of Broadway. They were to return in one hour. Much depended upon this one hour.

"Well," began Jilly, "what do you think of yerself?"

"Not a whole heap," replied Ed.

"I should say not. I suppose you fancy I ran across the Atlantic after you, eh?"

"I'm not quite such a derved ass as that, Jilly."

"I've only your word for it. A man who chucks a girl out of jealousy——"

"Jealousy? What on earth are you talking about?"

"'Bout you, young feller-me-lad. You called it pride, I know, but it wasn't. It was just ordinary jealousy. Well, you've nothing to be jealous about now. Did Mr. Dinck tell you I was broke?"

"Yes. Is it right, Jilly?"

"Near enough. I got to start again on this side of the water."

"I'm sorry. What made you go and put your money into a play?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"If it isn't private."

"You did."

"Me?" Ed stared very hard.

"Yes, Mr. Ed Chauncey, Esq., you. Think I was going to mope about you? Not much. I

went up to Westbury and played in repertory. That's how it all started."

"But London? What made you risk your money on a show in London? It's worse than gambling on a play in New York!"

"Shall I tell you that, too?"

"I'd like to know."

"It's a bit hard, this part. But it don't mean anything, understand. I did it because—well, if a play's a hit in London it generally comes to New York, don't it?"

"Jilly! You did it for me!"

"Keep yer seat, young man! Because I was a fool then it don't follow I'm a fool now. I've had a sea voyage. That blows away the cobwebs."

"Has it blown away all your—affection—for me, Jilly?"

"Never had any."

Ed Chauncey, very slowly, reached for his hat. Jilly said nothing. He rose and moved towards the door. Still Jilly said nothing. His hand was actually on the handle of the door before she spoke.

"Going to admit the public?" asked Jilly.

"May as well," said Ed.

"All right. Only don't talk to me about 'affection.' That's what relations say to each other at the end of letters."

Chauncey came back. His face was very seri-

ous. Jilly decided that he had been punished enough. The duel was over. Honour was satisfied.

"Try a word with more to it," she suggested.

He picked her up, quite suddenly, and held her so tightly that her feet were dangling in mid-air. She didn't care. The shabby little parlour was a palace, and the Prince and Princess had come together at last.

"Let's go and get married," whispered Ed.

"All right," said Jilly, her feet still dangling.

"You mean it, Jilly?"

"What d'you think I came three thousand miles for!"

"You—you *peach!* Will I just strangle you?"

"No. Set me down. There's something I forgot."

"Nothing that matters now!"

"Yes, it does. Set me down. I want me feet."

So he put her down, very reluctantly, and they resumed their chairs. The tussle, after all, was still to come.

"Ed," said Jilly, "did you mean it when you asked me to marry you?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"Never mind what I think. Did you or didn't you?"

"Never meant anything so much in my life."

"Right. Now we know where we are, because

I want to marry you. But I don't intend to be a widow to-day week."

Chauncey's face fell. It was of no use pretending to misunderstand.

"That's got to go through, Jilly."

"I beg your pardon. It has not."

"A contract's a contract."

"Yes, I know. A marriage-contract as well."

"This is a previous contract. I never went back on my word yet, Jilly."

"Yes, you did—to me."

"That wasn't business."

"No. Only a side-show."

"I don't mean that, and you know it. I honestly thought you could do better."

"And can't the Rotterdam folks do better?"

"Not in the time."

"No, I should say not. It isn't every day they find a mug willing to break his neck in public for twopence."

"I shan't break my neck."

"Well, your back, then."

"Nor my back, neither."

"No, you won't, because this turn's going to be cut right out and to-night. Those are my terms, Mr. Chauncey. You can take them or leave them."

"Look here, Jilly. Be reasonable. These people have billed me all over the City and further. The papers have made a big song about it. If I

back down now, they'll say I got cold feet at the last minute. I shall have heavy damages to pay. My career will be ruined. We can't afford both to be ruined."

"And we can't afford one of us to be dead. What's the good of being dead to get the money to get married. Men have got sense, I don't think!"

"You're breaking my heart, Jilly."

"That won't matter when your neck's broke."

"I must do it! I must!"

"All right, my lad. Do it. And I go back on the same old boat as soon as ever they've turned her round."

"If you do, I'll think of a worse stunt."

Jilly walked to the window. She was dying to burst into sobs, but she never sobbed. Tears were sloppy.

"Tell you what," came Ed's voice at last; "let me do it once, just to show I can do it, and then I'll cut it out for good and all."

"What about your contract?"

"That's in my contract. After the first show either party has the right to cut it out. I'll do that, Jilly, if you'll agree."

She knew that it meant a big loss. And she knew, too, that she would be in agony until after the performance. But if those were the best possible terms, well——

They sat in one crazy chair and discussed the

future. Jilly was not to be in front for the show. That was agreed. It would make Ed nervous, and nervousness was the one thing he could not afford.

So much settled, they dismissed the hateful business from their minds and talked of the honeymoon. Jilly, given the choice of a place, chose San Francisco. Ed loved her, if possible, more than ever for that choice, for he was a Californian. Dorothy Hollis would stay with Mrs. Dinck, which, as Ed pointed out, should pretty effectively settle the hash of one Gus.

At the end of the hour, these two returned.

"Well," asked Jilly, putting her arm round her little friend, "did you have a nice time?"

"Bully!" quoted Dolly.

"Did you see the White Lights?" asked Ed.

"Yes! Isn't it wonderful! I think New York is the most *beautiful* place in all the world!"

"I'll tell you one advantage it has over London," said Chauncey; "you can get supper pretty well as late as you like."

"For how many?" asked the innocent Dinck.

"Well, at a rough guess, four," replied Ed.

"Is that so?" asked Jilly. "Then you'd better go and find two nice girls to have supper along with you."

"I guess we've found 'em," said Ed.

"And supposing they don't want to go?"

"Why, in that case," replied Mr. Dinck, "we

shall be reluctantly compelled to use force, Miss Nipchin."

"Dolly," said Jilly solemnly, "how often have I warned you that all men are brutes!"

V

If this were a *feuilleton*, it would be correct at the present point to say that "the whole of New York was seething with excitement over the daring feat to be performed at the Rotterdam Theatre of Varieties by the celebrated equilibrist, Ed Chauncey." *Feuilletons* aside, however, there was sufficient interest in the affair to sell out all the reserved seats at high prices. It was not quite such a sensational stunt as that of the lamented Captain Webb, but there was an even chance that the performer would kill himself, and this was better than nothing. All the world over, the great public will pay money to see a man gamble with Death.

When Ed's number lit up, a sudden buzz filled the auditorium. The people were telling each other that this was "it" at last. They shifted in their seats a little. They stretched their necks to get them ready for watching every movement. Kind fathers took little sons on to their knees.

A gentleman in a dress-suit came down to the floats. Instantly there was a wonderful hush,

such as you seldom get in a cathedral. Nobody coughed. Great statesmen and great actors, once or twice in a lifetime, get such a compliment. Bishops never do. A bishop who preached to a congregation without a cough would probably suffer from nervous prostration.

The gentleman in the dress-suit, who was Ed's manager, said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, before Mr. Chauncey comes on to the stage, I should like to claim your attention for one minute. Mr. Chauncey has long been known to you as the premier equilibrist of the World. (Loud cheers. Half of them had never heard his name before the advertisements of this stunt came out—but no matter.) Mr. Chauncey has appeared in every great city in the United States of America, and also of Canada. Furthermore, he has recently returned from a long professional visit to Europe, during the course of which Mr. Chauncey had the honour of appearing before Their Majesties the King and Queen of England (loud cheers, whilst Ed, in the wings, muttered "Liar" to his dresser) and all the Crowned Heads of Europe.

"To-night, however, Mr. Chauncey will attempt a feat of even greater daring than those with which you are familiar. I will not anticipate your interest by attempting to describe it. Sufficient to say that the fee he is to receive at the conclusion of the turn is the highest ever paid to one

individual artiste by any management. (Tremendous cheers.)

"Just one word of warning, ladies and gentlemen. As Mr. Chauncey's life depends upon his nerve at the critical moment, I will ask you all to refrain from any sudden noise or ejaculation that might jeopardize the existence of this famous performer.

"I will now introduce Mr. Ed Chauncey!"

Whereupon Ed, in fleshings and a long ulster, stepped out from the wings, saying to his dresser as he went, "Enter the Human Chimpanzee!" A tremendous roar of applause greeted him. It really was tremendous. They were all very grateful to him for so kindly risking his neck for their amusement.

Ed bowed, shook hands with his manager, and the manager retired to the wings, where Ed's dresser was holding his lighted cigar. Ed took off his ulster and laid it over a gilded sofa. All the women admired his slim and supple figure. He rubbed his feet in some French chalk. The children asked why he did that, and were told, in excited whispers, not to worry or say a single word.

Mr. Chauncey vaulted on to his table, placed a chair on the table, and stood on one hand on the back of the chair. Loud applause. A footman in livery handed up more chairs in rapid succession. Ed tried them all, rung by rung, spar by

spar, and seemed satisfied. The ladder of chairs was growing. He was within eight feet of the "borders."

The footman threw him a hollow steel ball. Ed caught it nimbly, and showed it to the audience. There was no nick or crevice in it. They could see that. The orchestra was playing, very exquisitely and softly, Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." Ed had selected that composition. It was Jilly's favourite.

The footman threw him, at last, a steel rod. This, also, Ed showed to the audience. The orchestra stopped, quite suddenly, in the middle of a bar. A thrill ran through the massed audience. Now for it! A dropped pin would have made a crash!

The performer raised himself on to the back of the topmost chair. He stood there for a moment or two, smiling at the audience. The men on the bridge, looking down, heard him mutter to himself, "Great Men and Their Hobbies! Ed Chauncey at Home!"

He placed the steel ball on the back of the chair, between his legs, and the steel rod on top of that. The trick seemed utterly impossible. Women in the audience covered their eyes and would not look any longer, much to the annoyance of the men who had paid fabulous prices for their seats. But Ed was ignorant of all this. He was concentrating on the ball and the steel rod.

The slender tower of chairs was nothing. He had trained himself to regard them as nothing—a mere pedestal.

With one quick alert movement, he was standing on the steel ball. The audience could not help itself. It burst into a terrific cheer. Luckily, Ed was prepared for that. He had known it would come just at that point. Keeping a beautiful balance, he waited.

To complete the promised trick, he had now to balance himself on one hand at the top of the steel rod, which, in turn, rested on the steel ball. He found the precise spot, and gripped the rod. The amazed audience presently saw the light between his feet and the ball! But, this time, there was not a murmur of any sort. They knew that a man's life depended on their silence.

And then—something happened. It was all so quick that hardly anyone saw the beginning of it, but the steel ball left the back of the chair and came hurtling downwards! The women shrieked! Even the men cried out! Here, if you like, was a thrill for their money!

But Ed Chauncey was not killed yet. He alighted, with amazing dexterity, on the back of the highest chair, and just kept his balance with the steel rod. But for that rod he would almost certainly have been killed. As it was, he stood there, smiling, bowing, and kissing his hand, whilst the audience yelled its applause and an at-

tendant dashed out and caught the ball in his arms.

"Chuck it up!" said Ed, and they all knew, though they could not hear for the noise, what order he had given. A few of the people exclaimed that the trick should be stopped, but the majority applauded harder than ever. He had so nearly done it that they passionately wanted him to succeed!

Once again the ball was placed in position; once again the rod was placed on the ball; once again they saw the space between his feet and the ball gradually growing wider. Up he went! Up, and up, and up! If the ball should slip now! Or the rod! How could he possibly save himself? The women, in their excitement, were clinging to the arms of their menfolk, and muttering, "Oh, my land! Oh, my Lord! Oh, my land!"

Now, at last, he was straightening out that lithe, slim, pink form at the very summit of the steel rod! The trick was done! Live or die, he had done it, and Ed Chauncey, for the moment, was the idol of New York! He knew it, even as he poised himself in that perilous attitude, and he wondered what Jilly would say when she heard of it and saw the papers in the morning!

Slowly, he began the descent. Down, down, down, till his feet touched the steel ball. Then he did something he had never rehearsed, but which the accident of a few minutes before had taught him. With a little cry of triumph, he

kicked the steel ball from under him, and landed on his feet on the back of the topmost chair!

It was all roses after that—roses and shouts and waving handkerchiefs! For eight minutes, by his manager's watch, he stood bowing and smiling on the stage! And the business men, in the meantime, were gathered together in the wings, entirely surrounded by contract-forms and cheque-books.

VI

But there was a double surprise in store for these gentlemen. Having received his fee for the initial performance, as agreed, Ed astonished them all by refusing to negotiate further. The consternation was tragic! They had been so busy counting the unhatched chickens that this possibility had never occurred to them. They were at first incredulous, and then angry.

"Why, Ed," sneered one financier, who never crossed Broadway without taking a policeman's arm, "I scarcely expected *you* to get cold feet!"

"It isn't cold feet," replied Ed quietly.

"Looks mighty like it, anyway."

"That's what the public will think," struck in another.

"They can think what they like," said Chauncey.

"Don't the terms suit you? They're pretty handsome, anyway!"

"I'm not quarrelling with the terms."

"Then what's your trouble? Lord, man, you're throwing away a fortune!"

"And getting one," replied Ed, with his slow, easy smile.

"Not from another management!"

"Why, yes, from another management."

They all began to speak together at this. His contract expressly stated that they had the first call. They were ready to exercise their option. If he attempted to appear under another management in that trick they would certainly injunct him.

"This management I'm speaking of," explained Ed, "ain't no vaudeville management. It's a private affair—a syndicate strictly limited to two persons. Got me now, Steve?"

"Snakes if I don't think it's a woman!" exclaimed the leader of the crowd. "Who'd 'a' thought Ed Chauncey would get fooling away the best chance of his career for the sake of a petticoat! Come, Ed, pull yourself together, my boy! If you can't think of yourself, think of us!"

This pathetic plea moved the lover not a whit.

"A contract's a contract," he reminded them. "I got the right to back down after one show, and I do it, and that's all there is to it!"

"Well," said the leader, "all I've got to say is this. If you're marrying a big pile of stuff, that's

all right. Lucky for you." But if you ain't, as sure as you're standing there the day'll come when you'll want us to book your show. Now, Chauncey, just put it to yourself: what will our answer be?"

Before Ed could reply a small, ill-clad urchin, with bare feet and a grubby face, dropped from the "cat-ladder" and thrust himself into the very centre of the ring. Ed stared at this apparition just as hard as the financiers. And yet, in a way, there was something familiar about it.

"You can answer wot you bally well please!" struck in the youth. "If you want necks broke in this here theaytre, get up on top of that lot of chairs and break yer own! See? Because Ed Chauncey's neck, from to-morrow on, belongs to me, and I got no use for it in two pieces! If you want to know who I am, I'm Jilly Nipchin, from London, England. For any further details I'll refer you to Mr. James Rhimes, my agent, who's somewhere there in the background. And if you want to know what I'm doing in your hall, in this get-me-up, and on your stage, I'll tell you. I promised Ed I wouldn't see the show from the front, and I didn't. But I wasn't going to miss it—not me! So I faked meself up in these togs—which I happened to have in me trunk in case I got a job at five dollars a week—and I got round one of the chaps to let me see the turn from the flies. And I did see it, my Gawd! It's the pluckiest bit

of work I ever see, and now I'll tell you something else, gentlemen.

"You say Ed's playing it low down to act on the fair rights in his contract. If I'd had my way he'd have broke the contract altogether, and chanced the consequences. But he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't let you down after you spending all that money on the hoardings. So I give in, but I made him swear to chuck it for good and all—that one trick, I mean—after to-night, or I wouldn't have anything more to do with him. That's the whole tale, and if you try to queer his pitch, out of spite, with the other syndicates, all I can say is this is not the country of jolly good sports I took it for! Ed, you silly old rascal, kiss yer wife!"

Whatever faults your American may have, nobody who knows him will deny that his heart is right. The financiers, naturally, were disappointed, but they liked Jilly, and they liked her enterprise. So they bore off the happy couple to the board-room, where the forthcoming wedding was celebrated in bumpers of champagne.

"Gentlemen," cried the chief spokesman, with one foot on his chair and the other on the table, "I give you the toast of a double-turn that will prove a winner wherever it may be booked—CHAUNCEY and NIPCHIN!"

"Say!" muttered Mr. Rhimes, busily scribbling

in his pocket-book, "not a bad little notion, that! There's a bunch of dollars in it!"

VII

Ed and Jilly were married next morning by special license, and set out, the same afternoon, for San Francisco and the Golden Gate. Dorothy Hollis was at the station to see them off, chaperoned by Mrs. Dinck and Miss Dinck, with Augustus Dinck waving his hat like a madman in the background. Mr. Rhimes, the agent, was there too. Carefully coached by Jilly, who was not yet ready to undeceive Ed as to the state of her affairs, Mr. Rhimes regretted that nothing had turned up for her as yet, but he had hopes of securing her an "audition" when she returned to New York.

Ed had booked a drawing-room car right through, and the journey was just a lovely dream for little Jilly. Cities or deserts, flowers or rocks, it was all beautiful to her. Yellow-faced millionaires, grumbling at the dust, would have given half their wealth for a pair of eyes that could see life and the world as Jilly saw them on that journey.

They arrived at San Francisco quite late, and went to their suite in the hotel forthwith. Jilly's first vision of the dream-city was reserved for the morrow.

"I guess you'll be a bit surprised," said Ed, swelling with loyal pride.

"Think I will?" replied Jilly.

"It'll be a wonder if you're not!"

"I wish there could be a surprise for you," said Jilly.

"Guess I married one," was Ed's answer.

He was up early the following morning, and went into his dressing-room to shave. Jilly, still in bed, presently heard a bewildered exclamation. Then Ed, his face half-lathered, appeared in the doorway.

"Did you suspicion it was there?" he asked.

"Wot?"

"Come and look! If this don't beat——!"

Jilly slipped into a *peignoir* and went with him to the window. On the opposite wall was a huge placard, which read:

JILLY NIPCHIN

FIRST APPEARANCE IN AMERICA

of the

GREAT ENGLISH COMEDIENNE!!

Across one corner was pasted a small "To-night" slip.

"Wot about it?" said Jilly timidly.

"You made me look a nice sort of a guy!"

"Cross, Ed?"

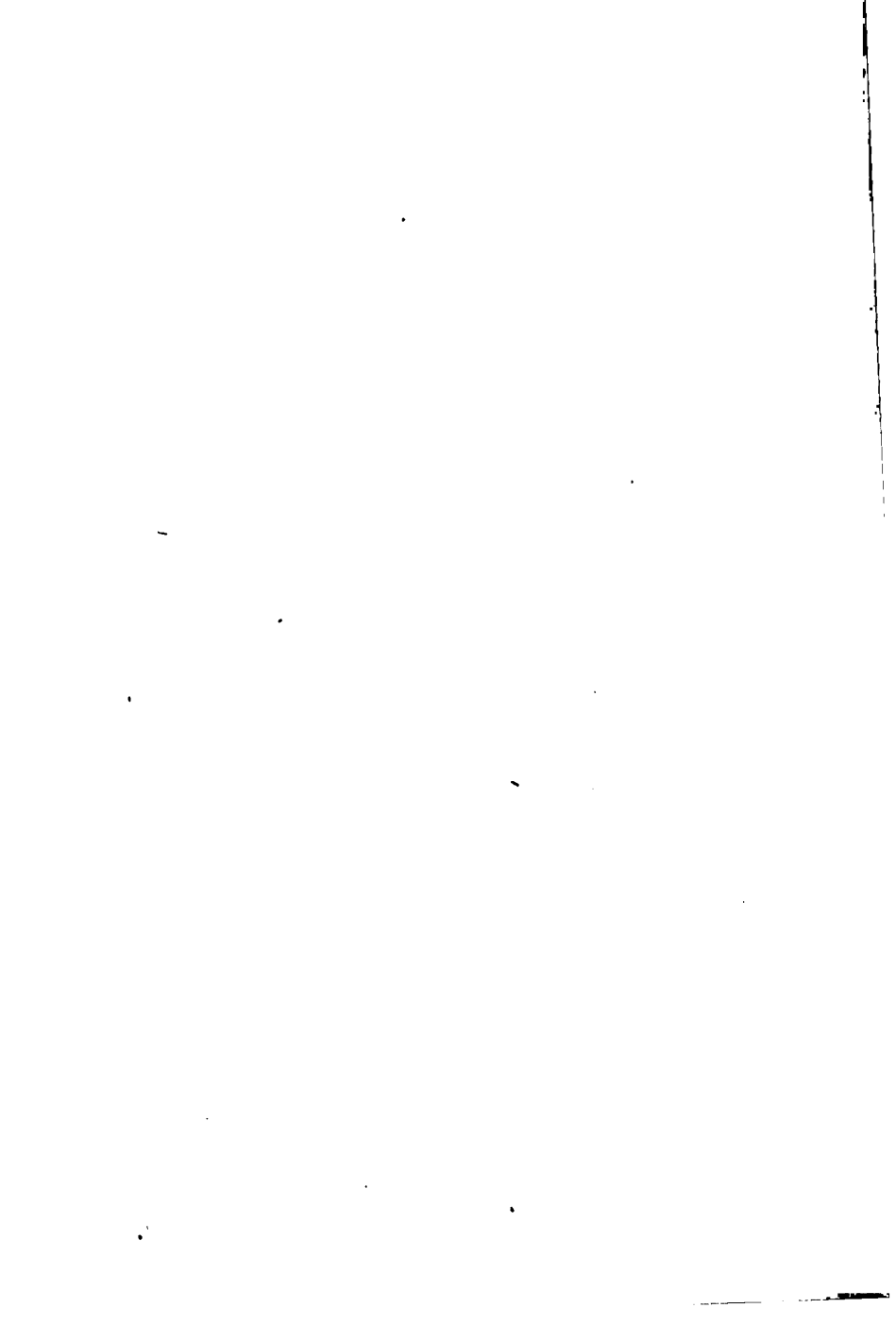
He looked down at the little figure in the blue *peignoir*, and the cluster of short curls, and the childish upturned face, and the grey eyes waiting anxiously for his answer.

"Cross?" whispered Ed. He drew a long, long breath. "*Gee, kid!*"

His arms went about her. The little warm body moulded itself to his.

They had reached their Golden Gate.

THE END



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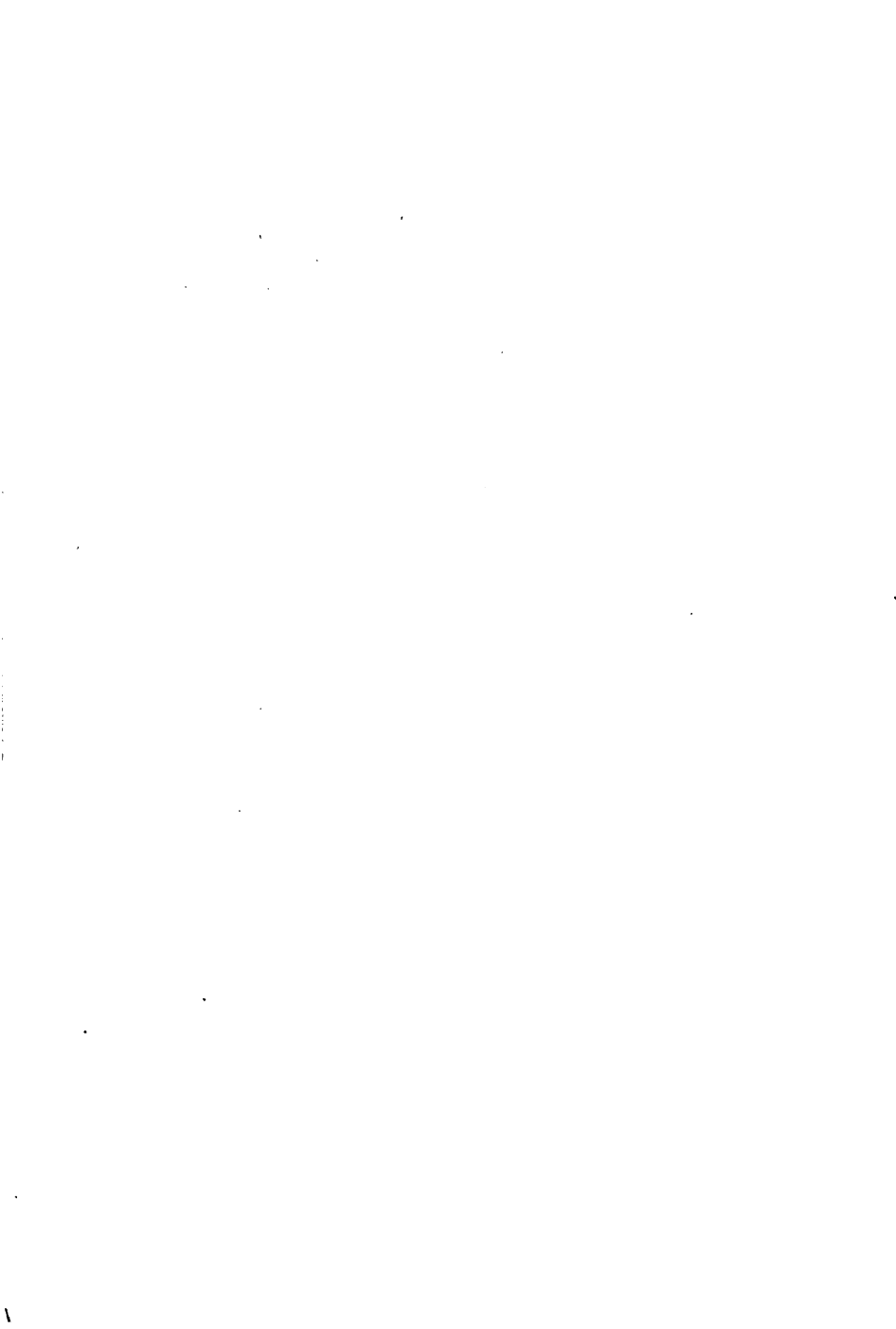
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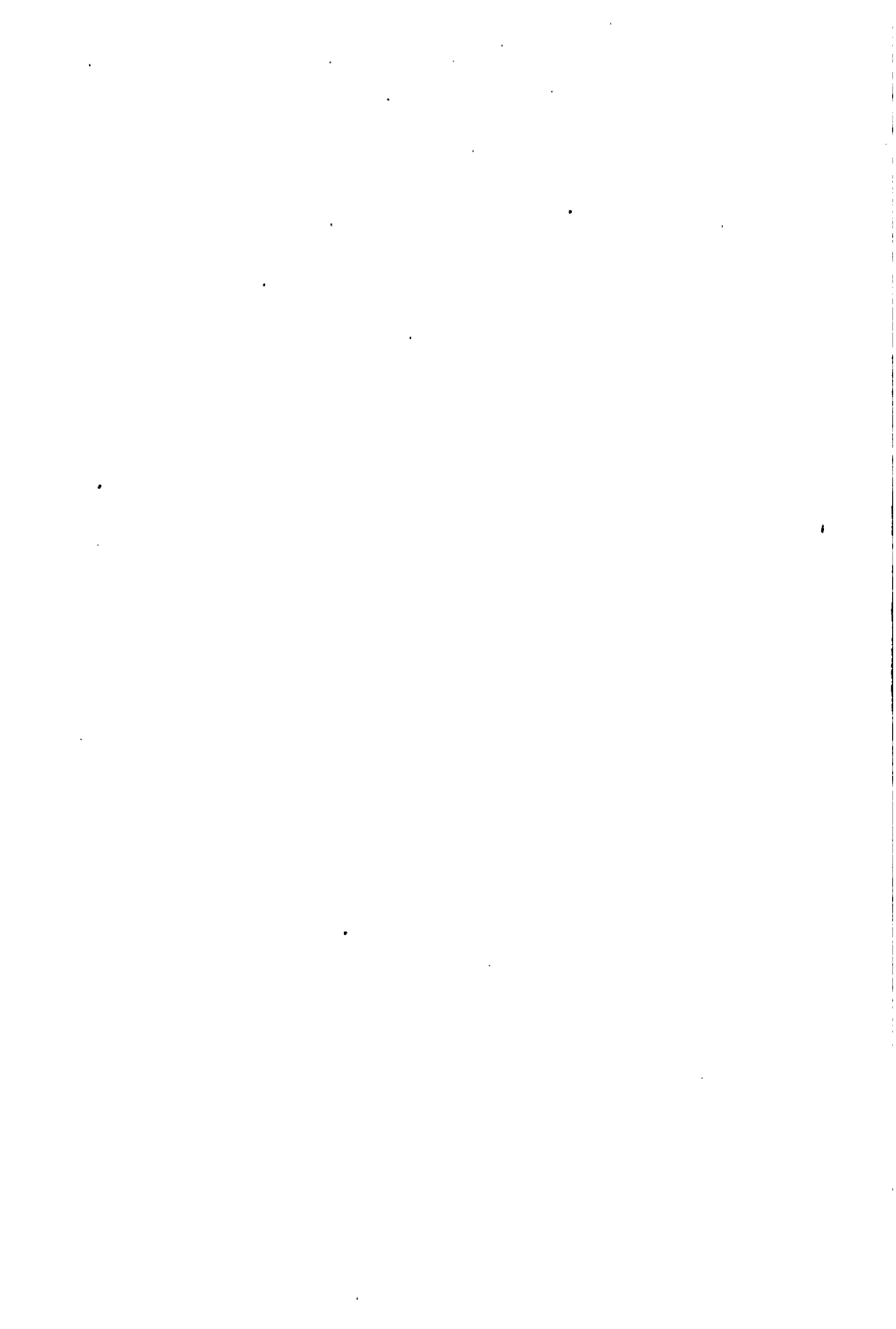
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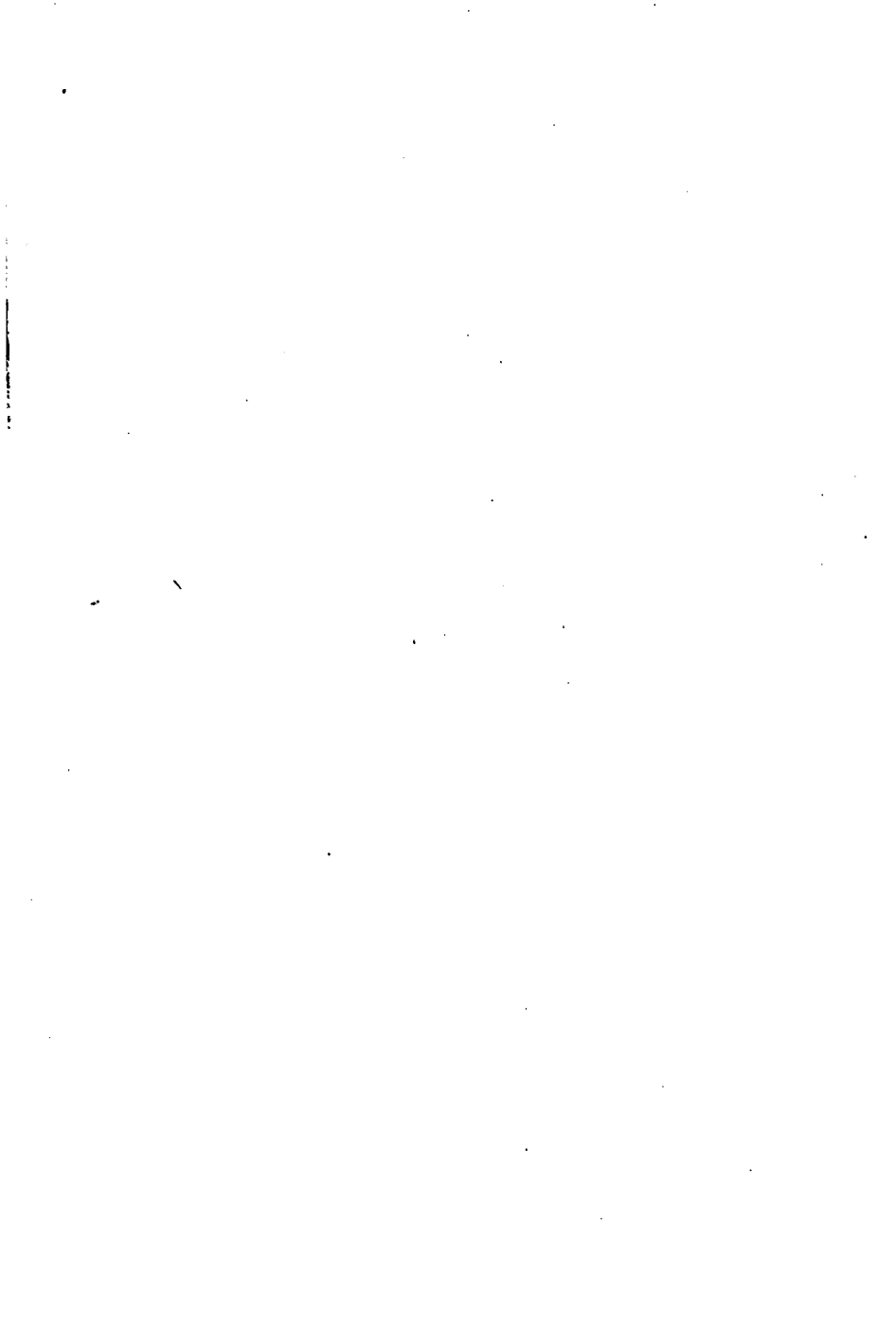
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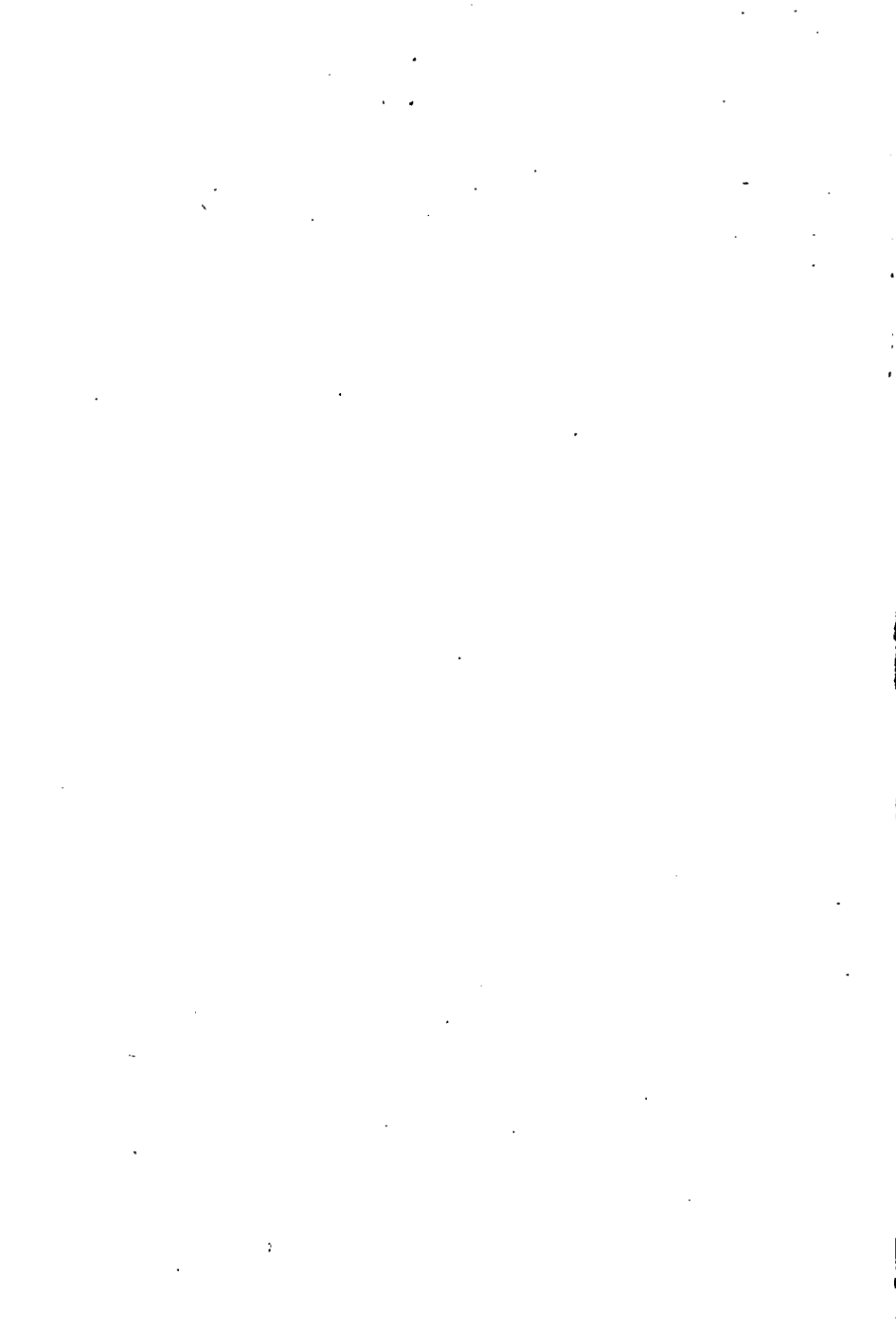
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